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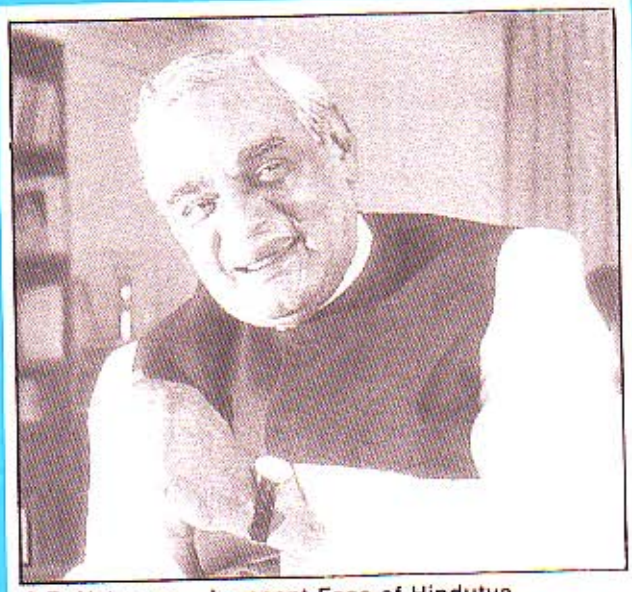

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NEWS REVIEW

Outlook for 1998

As Sri Lanka is about to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of independence from colonial rule, what is the prospect for 1998?

Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga thinks 1998 will be a turning point for the island nation. Top priority is being given to ending the costly ethnic war through the Government's twin-track strategy characterised as "War for Peace". The hopes and expectations of an early peace and an end to the island's protracted ethnic war ended in a resumption of hostilities when the LTTE pulled out of the peace talks with the Government in April 1995.

In a New Year message to the people, the President urged them to end their differences and unite for a peaceful 1998 - the 50th anniversary of the country's independence from Britain. "Independence is much more than throwing off the shackles of foreign rule. It is the building of a new inclusive political structure that will transcend divisive politics...It is the consolidation of economic independence through the banishment of hunger, poverty, unemployment and lack of basic necessities."

The President also said, "We are very near a resolution to ethnic conflict and the resulting war that has festered in our body politic. This is the result of our steadfast pursuit of a political solution in tandem with an effective military strategy."

Many do not share the President's optimism. Political analysts - and most people on the street - expect the political and economic situation to worsen in the year ahead. "There is going to be an overall deterioration in 1998," says Dharmaratnam Sivaram, a well-known political commentator.

Some warn that Government's continued preoccupation with the elusive peace process will lead to further neglect of issues such as the high cost of living, worsening the problems of ordinary people.

"Some people in the government seem to place their faith in a military solution; others in a military-cum- political solution. But nobody seems to know exactly where they are heading," says former UNP Finance Minister Ronnie de Mel.

The ruling People's Alliance (PA) has completed drafting a new constitution aimed at finally solving the country's divisive ethnic problem.

On the war front, the armed forces are pushing the Tamil Tigers deeper into the jungles while gaining control of more territory. Government troops are battling the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in an effort to open up a land route to the northern Jaffna peninsula with heavy casualties on both sides.

Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, who shares Kumaratunga's view that the Tigers must be defeated militarily before talking peace, says that the ongoing seven-month operation to retake the strategic highway to the northern Jaffna peninsula will be completed by February 4, the day Sri Lanka won independence from British rule. Very few believe Ratwatte's claim as many such claims in the past have rarely materialised.

The Tamil Tigers are fighting every inch of the way, day after day, night after night. Even if the Government succeeds in retaking the highway, that won't be the end, as the Tigers would continue their fight. Only recently, the Tamil Tiger leader called upon the people to, "We are aware that freedom is not a concession gained from the enemy, but a sacred right which has to be fought by shedding blood and making sacrifices" and committed himself "to struggle until we realise our goal of freedom."

President Kumaratunga sees the twin approach of fighting the LTTE and preparing a peace package at the same time, as a way out of the political quagmire.

In the government's favour is the recent announcement by main opposition United National Party (UNP) plan to submit its own peace proposals by the end of January. The UNP spent nearly three years discussing Government proposals in an All-Party Parliamentary Select Committee of MPs. The UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe, is a recent convert to what he describes as "needs-based devolution" for the regions. He sees the prospect of the North-east of the island inhabited predominantly by Tamil speaking people being granted more devolved legislative and executive powers than other regions.

"The peace package is on the right track with the PA and the UNP getting together at last," observes Jehan Perera, media director of the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, a Non Governmental Organisation which is working towards promoting peace in the country.

Kumaratunga herself is pleased with developments in the UNP. "I am now gratified to hear that after more than two years of deliberations at the level of the parliamentary select committee, the UNP has at last appointed some kind of a committee to formulate their own proposals...," she told a Colombo newspaper recently.

But she warns that "if the UNP continues to be obstinate, then it would be essential that we seek other ways of implementing our political package that addresses the question of power-sharing between the centre and regions."

In the face of possible UNP opposition, the Government is considering holding a non-binding referendum to seek public support for its peace package. In Parliament, a two-thirds majority vote is required for any constitutional reform to go through.

Government planners feel that with most Sri Lankans yearning for peace, a referendum might successfully pass the Government proposals which are aimed at devolving legislative and executive powers to the regions.

But Ronnie De Mel, a parliamentarian and high-ranking member of the opposition UNP, warns any attempt to force a solution with a referendum could lead to a constitutional and political crisis and possibly a period of political violence in the capital. "This is something all of us should be careful about," he said.

Apart from the military conflict between government forces and the LTTE on the one hand, and the political standoff between the Government and the UNP on the other, the economy is a worrying factor with a rising cost of living for the average people.

"The people are sorely affected by the cost of living and high prices which, for example, are far higher than the prices in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh where ordinary items of food, clothing, travelling, etc., are concerned," De Mel said.

He said none of the big infrastructure schemes, to modernise the nation's seaports, airports, roads, energy, irrigation and tourism, have taken off. Meanwhile military spending, rose this year to $730 million compared to $180 million in the late 1980s.

Government ministers including Deputy Finance Minister Gamini Lakshman Peiris reject this argument saying the economy is now on track with inflation and unemployment down and the country's privatisation program, which is selling off public assets that are unviable under state control, is on schedule.

Government economists say the previous regime's economic mismanagement has led to a delay in putting the economy right. "We had to spend a lot of time putting the fundamentals back on track, after that disastrous period, before proceeding with the real development," one government economist noted.

However, continued allegations of corruption, dubious tenders and political favouritism are dogging this government as well.

On the military front, according to senior army field commanders, they hope to open a government-controlled road through the LTTE strongholds in the north by February. They plan to open a new route to the northern town of Jaffna and use it as the main supplies route for the government, according to one commander involved in the ongoing Operation Jayasikuru ("Victory Assured.") But the operation has been most expensive both in terms of loss of life and military expenditure. While the LTTE has lost territory and many of its cadres, at the same time, it has inflicted unprecedented casualties and loss of military hardware upon the armed forces.

The received wisdom in Government circles is that a military victory would force the Tamil Tigers to either reopen peace talks with Colombo or accept the political package. However, political columnist Sivaram predicts that the army will open a precarious route to the north "as a cosmetic gesture to keep to the February 4 timetable. But will they be able to control that road, is the question," he said. In most of the government-held territory, the army controls the roads during the day. But it's no man's land by night. Sivaram also says the rebels will step up attacks in the capital and outside, as pressure mounts on them.

Leader of the Sarvodaya movement and well known social activist A T Ariyaratne says ordinary people are not interested in peace packages or wars. "They have lost faith in all politicians and scholars and their political stances. To them the cost of living is astronomical. They are not interested in constitutional reforms and change."

"I have met people living in villages near where the fighting goes on and they are not emotionally involved or bothered with intellectual exercises. They just want peace," said Ariyaratne.

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Amnesty Calls for Inquiry into Prison Killing

The Sri Lankan government has instituted an inquiry following a call by Amnesty International called upon Sri Lanka's Minister of Justice to order a full and impartial inquiry into the killing of two Tamil and one Muslim detainees on 12 December at Kalutara prison, south of the capital, Colombo.

Muthulingam Dharmalingam and Shanmugarajah Sivanesan, from Jaffna, and Sharif Jehan, a displaced person from Mannar, were among 137 Tamil detainees held at Kalutara prison. The three were reportedly hacked to death in front of Ward D at around 1 pm on 12 December by a group of Sinhalese common criminal prisoners in what appears to have been a premeditated attack.

Prison authorities had last month transferred 223 Tamil detained from a Colombo prison to Kalutara saying the jail in Colombo did not provide sufficient security. A group of Sinhalese prisoners allegedly clubbed to death the three victims and injured seven others after a dispute over food distribution at the prison. Following the incident, police said that most of the Sinhalese prisoners had been transferred to two separate jails in the southern province after the riot and additional guards were also sent to the prison.

The attack drew angry reactions from Tamil political parties and the government ordered a high level investigation into the incident. Following preliminary investigations, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, G L Peiris, recommended to President Chandrika Kumaratunga to appoint a commission of inquiry and ordered a special police unit to be set up at the prison while another detention centre is repaired and renovated for the detainees to be relocated.

In its letter to Professor G. L. Peiris, Amnesty International expressed concern for the safety of other detainees who witnessed the killings and are currently under guard by prison staff who may have been involved in the act. Amnesty International urged that all necessary steps be taken to protect these witnesses.

AI pointed out that during a magisterial inquiry into the killings, several detainees who reportedly saw the killings refused to give evidence out of fear for their lives. To Amnesty International's knowledge, those responsible have not yet been identified.

Prison staff and army personnel deployed at the prison appear to have failed to take measures to protect the Tamil detainees at the time and, according to some reports, were even actively involved in the attack which lasted more than an hour, stated AI.

According to some sources, prison staff had opened the gate to Ward D around 11 am, and ignored pleas made in the next two hours by several of the Tamil detainees to lock the gate. Reports also indicate that an armed soldier on sentry duty on the southern side of the prison ignored pleas for protection from the three detainees while they were hacked to death in front of him. Army personnel and prison staff are also said to have failed to take action against a group of civilians who had gathered outside the prison and were throwing stones and other objects into the prison throughout the attack, AI said.

Amnesty International noted in its letter that some action was taken by the prison authorities to defuse the situation - such as the swift transfer of most of the Sinhalese convicted prisoners to other prisons. Nevertheless, AI urged the government to initiate a review of measures to safeguard the security of political prisoners held in the same prisons as common criminal suspects and convicts, albeit in separate wards.

Fearing for their security, more than 300 Tamils detained at the Kalutara prison began a hunger strike on 13 December demanding that they be transferred from Kalutara to Colombo. Following an assurance from the government of full protection and a speeding processing of their court cases, the detainees ended their hunger strike on 16 December.

Immediate End to War Urged by Peace Convention

More than 1,700 participants, delegated by communities in all 25 districts in the country, met at the National Peace Delegates' Convention held at the BMICH on Sunday and passed a resolution calling for an immediate end to the war. Approximately 1,200 of the delegates were Sinhalese, while 350 were Tamil and 150 Muslim. More than half were from conflict-affected districts of the north-east and bordering districts. 50 disabled soldiers also participated and approved the resolution.

In addition to giving assent to the resolution, a wide range of representatives, including disabled soldiers, women victims of war, affected farmers and fishermen, community leaders and peace workers spoke on the need to resolve the conflict without delay. Many of the speakers related the tragic effects of the war upon them.

A study on the Cost of the War undertaken by the Marga Institute was also released at the convention. Among its findings was that the total losses in 1996 amounted to Rs 165 billion or 21.3 percent of GDP, and was more than three times the direct budgetary expenditure on defence. If not for the war, average household incomes would have been higher by 40 percent and government expenditures on health, education and roads could have been at least one third higher. The efforts of the National Peace Convention to bring an end to the ongoing war in Sri Lanka and bring peace through negotiations have received widespread support.

On behalf of the Governing Council, its media director issued the following statement:

"The LTTE welcomed the National Peace Delegates Convention held on January 4, 1998 at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. In a statement, the International Secretariat of the LTTE said that they welcomed "any just and fair solution towards ushering in peace in the is-

land."

"Earlier, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe in goodwill messages to the National Peace Delegates Convention had referred to the need to end the war.

"President Kumaratunga pledged that her government would do "everything possible within our power to achieve a political solution with the cooperation of all sections of our society." The Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe decried the "war mentality that brings with it hatred and destruction" and said that "there can be no victors in war."

"In its message to the delegates, the LTTE said that they "applaud your contention that the basis for a just and honourable peace is the recognition of the right of all nationalities to determine their own destiny". The statement added that "there should be transparency in any talks leading to the resolution of a conflict."

"On Sunday 29 December, 1700 peace delegates from all 25 districts of the country met and approved a resolution calling for an immediate end to the war through negotiations conducted with a "parity of dignity and without pre-conditions". The resolution also called for a restructuring of the state in a manner that could provide for self-government by all "nationalities and communities" living within the country."

Local Elections in Jaffna

The local elections set to be held on 29 January will be the first to be held in 15 years in Sri Lanka's war-torn north. The polls are intended to set the stage for the return of civil administration to northern Jaffna and parts of Kilinochchi districts, which are currently under military control.

The country's two main parties, the governing and the opposition, will not be contesting in these elections. Even the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which decided to field candidates is out of the contest because its nomination papers had been rejected on technicality by the Commissioner of Elections.

Contesting in the elections are four former armed militant groups, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). The battle for the 234 seats of the local bodies will be fought exclusively between these Tamil parties.

The LTTE, which has been battling the government forces, has called upon the people not to participate in the elections and described the Tamil parties taking part as "quislings" and "traitors".

Being the first election to be held since 1983 and in defiance of the powerful LTTE, there is considerable interest as to how the voting public will react. Jaffna and Kilinochchi, which were recaptured from LTTE control last year, are still under military control. The elections will set the stage for a return to civilian rule. Some see the election as an attempt by the Government to demonstrate that it has succeeded in restoring a civilian administration in these areas while at the same time releasing the military from undertaking civilian administrative tasks. Others see it as a test as to the hold the LTTE has over the people of Jaffna.

"It is the unfreezing of democratic politics in Jaffna," Dayan Jayatilleke, political analyst and editor of the monthly Lanka Guardian says."It will be interesting to see how the consciousness of Tamil people has evolved in the intervening period."

"There is now some degree of risk-sharing in advancing the peace process and allowing democratic rights to the people of Jaffna," said Kethesh Loganathan, editor of The Weekend Express newspaper. "It is significant that unlike the last time when all Tamil parties objected to elections in Jaffna saying that the situation was not conducive, this time some of them have seen a virtue out of the necessity." The government last year also called for nominations to hold elections in the region. But Tamil parties backed out saying some areas were still under LTTE control and elections were not possible.

"The government is trying to marginalise LTTE politically, but it will depend on whether other Tamil parties are able to function in the north and the kind of support they get from the people," said Loganathan who has written several books on the ethnic crisis.

"The government is trying to defy the Tigers and show they are in control of the situation," said political analyst Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu. "It is a four-cornered fight between former militant forces and I hope it does not turn into an internecine war. A lot will depend on the impartiality of the armed forces in Jaffna. They will have to be fair," he said. He discounted fears that the LTTE would try to disrupt the polls, saying the rebels would also be keen to gauge the mood of the people.

Jayatilleke said it would be difficult for the LTTE to move its fighters from the jungles of the Wanni region and change the security balance in Jaffna. "The Tamil Tigers have to decide whether to commit cadres to disrupt the electoral process in Jaffna and kill candidates," Jayatilleke said. "The military has learnt some lessons and now knows the game better. They just might set a trap for LTTE."

He said the military, which must provide security for the polls, faced the same dilemma - whether or not to move troops from Wanni where it is embroiled in a seven-month campaign against the LTTE to seize a key highway to Jaffna. "This makes the game very decisive and the stakes high," he said. "But any which way, one would be able to ascertain (after the elections) which of the groups has any semblance of influence in the area."

Sri Lanka's main opposition party dismissed the government's move to hold elections in northern areas as a political sham. The United National Party (UNP) said in a statement that Jaffna and parts of Kilinochchi district were not ready for elections. "The UNP is totally opposed to the holding of so-called elections to local authorities in the Jaffna peninsula at this time when the law and order situation is such that there is no possibility of a free and fair exercise of the fundamental right to vote," the statement said. "It (the government) hopes to gain political mileage by this charade. But people will not be taken in..."

Amidst accusations that the armed cadres of the EPDP were preventing and intimidating its rivals from campaigning, Sri Lanka's Inspector General of Police (IGP) W.B Rajaguru an-

nounced that he was taking steps to establish a Police station in the Delft island (Nedunthivu) with the assistance of the Navy. The IGP visited Jaffna to assess the situation and consult with his officers there about security arrangements for the polls during the campaign and on the day of the polls. The Delft Police station is to be established before the elections.

The island of Delft is far flung from the peninsula and remains quite isolated. It has its own local government body. The Sri Lankan army and Navy are not present in the island. The heavily armed cadres of the EPDP dominate and control Delft with the consent of the military. Rejecting the accusations of intimidation by its cadres, EPDP leader Douglas Devananda said he will disarm his cadres if the government provided additional troops to Kayts, Delft and Pungudutivu. "We are there to protect these islands from the LTTE. Since we are facing a manpower crisis we are ready to draw these cadres for electioneering if the government provides security to these islands," he said.

Officials headed by Jaffna's Security Forces Commander, Major General Lionel Balagalle, were met representatives of political parties contesting the local elections on 15 January where it was announced that the security forces and Police were taking charge of security in the outlying islands of the Jaffna peninsula with effect from the following day (Saturday, 16 January). Major General Balagalle told the meeting that Navy and Army personnel would move into the islands of Delft and Pungudutivu. In addition a string of Police Posts were also being established in the island for the conduct of polls. These two islands had previously remained under the control of armed cadres of the EPDP with no Police or security forces presence.

The Sri Lankan Elections Commission's branch in Jaffna will begin distributing poll cards to voters in the peninsula from January 18. Commission officials at the Jaffna Kachcheri say that people can obtain the cards by presenting their national identity cards at the government post offices in their areas.

The cards will be sent to Jaffna under special military escort from Colombo on January 16 Jaffna Kachcheri sources said that about 1200 persons expected to arrive from Colombo for election duties.

Although the number of officials required to handle the local polls under normal circumstances is more than 2000, the system of clustering several polling booths together has helped the government to conduct the elections with less volunteers.

The Sri Lankan Elections Commission has been in dire straits unable to find Tamil speaking volunteers in the government service to handle the Jaffna polls since nominations were filed for the elections last month.

Independence Celebrations Amidst Protests

Prince Charles visit to Sri Lanka as Chief Guest at Sri Lanka's 50th anniversary celebration of its independence from colonial rule has provoked opposition from Sinhala-Buddhist extremist sections in the island, and one of the country's leading Buddhist monks has announced that he would boycott the ceremonies associated with the occasion.

The Sri Lankan government has announced its plan of celebrations for the country's 50th Independence Day, which falls on February 4, 1998. The main ceremony will be held in the central mountain city of Kandy, the seat of Sri Lanka's last king, to mark the 50th anniversary.

According to security sources, the capital and the main cities of the island would be placed under tight security to prevent any possible attacks by the Tamil Tigers to disrupt the celebrations.

Local and foreign dignitaries will go to Kandy to participate in the celebrations there, which will start on February 3 and end on the 5th. Fifteen foreign ministers from SAARC and Non-Aligned Movement countries are expected to attend Sri Lanka's Independence jubilee, according to Deputy Foreign Minister Lakshman Kiriella.

Religious activities, parade of the three armed services and the police and cultural performances will be conducted on the occasion. Simultaneous celebrations are expected to be held throughout the country except the war-torn areas of the Northeast.

In the capital city of Colombo, a grand exhibition will be held from February 5 to 20 to highlight the progress Sri Lanka has achieved since its independence in 1948.

The government has allocated a sum of 300 million rupees (5 million U.S. dollars) for the celebrations.

The National Joint Committee (NJC), which some months ago spearheaded the Sinhala Commission Report primarily directed against the devolution proposals of the Government, stated that it would write to diplomatic missions in Colombo asking them to boycott the celebrations on February 4 if Prince Charles participated in official events. The committee says the British brutally crushed movements for independence in 1818 and 1848, killing hundreds of Sinhalese people during their 152-year colonial rule over Sri Lanka.

"The Queen, representing the government of Britain, must apologise to Sri Lankans before Prince Charles comes," Piyanasena Dissanayake, secretary of the NJC, told the press. "If he (Charles) says that he's coming to make this apology, a formal apology, he will be most welcome to do that," Dissanayake said.

"We can't undo history, and we can't as a nation forget some of the incidents that took place under their regime here in this country. They (the British) should at least have the courtesy to apologise to us for what their grandfathers or great-grandfathers did," he added.

The Federation of Buddhist Organisation said in a statement that Prince Charles's participation in a ceremony at a place where Sri Lankans were killed was an insult to the nation. The ceremony is due to be held at central hill town of Kandy, the capital of the Kandyan kingdom that the British overran before taking control of Sri Lanka.

"Think about the gravity of Prince Charles's visit, after all the harm the British have brought about to the Sinhalese nation and the Buddhist religion," Federation Secretary Puniyawardana Gallage said in the statement.

"Prince Charles should apologise for all the wrongs done, especially com-

ing from a nation that proclaims human rights for all," he added.

The Mahanayake of the Malwatta Chapter, Ven Rambukwelle Sri Vipassi Thera told the press that he would not attend the main function on the grounds that Prince Charles had been invited as the Chief Guest for the function.

However, the Malwatte Mahanayake Thera will attend the Thevava at the Dalada Maligawa which is due to be attended by the Prince on the eve of Independence Day.

"I have nothing against Prince Charles personally, but whoever invited him should have thought about the relevance of inviting him for this function in the context of plundering and exploitation of our resources by the British rulers," he said.

Targeting Tea Industry

Even as tea production is reported have to hit a new high during last year, reports from Colombo indicate that the Tamil Tigers are engaged in a deliberate plan to disrupt the production and export of Sri Lankan tea, one of the country's main foreign exchange earners. Reports quoting government intelligence sources said that the Tigers planned to sabotage electricity supplies to tea factories and disrupt plantation fuel supplies.

Sri Lanka's tea production during last year is expected to hit a new high of 270 million kilograms, compared to last year's record of 258 million kilograms, according to Tea Board. The tea output rose by 7 percent in the first ten months to almost 225 million kilograms from 211 million kilograms in the same period last year. The main reasons for the increase in the production are favourable weather conditions, the better management practices of the estates and increased use of fertilizer, the sources said.

Tea is one of the island country's main export items, accounting for 26 percent of its export earnings. Sri Lanka's total tea exports last year was 244 million kilograms.

Therefore it is obvious that the LTTE, which is engaged in a bitter life-and-death war with government forces in the northeast of the island, should consider the tea industry as a legitimate economic target. "The reason behind these moves by the LTTE is aimed at disrupting the country's economy which will make it difficult for the government to purchase arms to fight the war," a Colombo report said.

Another agency report from Colombo said that the Tigers are infiltrating the tea plantations in the central part of Sri Lanka from the north in a bid to cause massive disruption of work there. They are planning to sabotage electricity supplies to tea factories and disrupt fuel transportation network in the plantations.

According to intelligence reports, at least seven rebel cells led by men of the LTTE's intelligence unit have infiltrated the estate sector in the central tea country from the north. They said that, apart from sabotage activities, Tamil Tigers are also planning to infiltrate the estate sector trade unions and incite the plantation workers to stage strikes on estates in the country.

A number of electricity transformers in central Badulla and Bandarawela towns have been blasted and fuel bowsers in Hatton town were also set alight in the recent weeks. Tea industry officials said production had been affected slightly but if such attacks continued the industry could be jeopardised.

"They (LTTE) want to divert the military's attention from the north. Unlike in the capital Colombo the plantations cover such a large region that it would be difficult to provide security," said Maxwell Fernando of commodity brokers Sommerville & Co. Ltd.

Unions Threaten Strike in Plantations

Sri Lanka's powerful plantation unions on 9 January sparked fears of an economic slowdown in 1998 by threatening to launch an indefinite strike over a wage dispute.

Trade unions said about 400,000 workers on Sri Lanka's tea estates would go on strike from February 5 if plantation companies refused to meet their wage demands.

"We plan an indefinite strike from February 5 if the companies don't agree to our demands," an official of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, the biggest plantation union, told the press.

Industry analysts said the impact on the economy could be high since tea exports was one of the biggest foreign exchange earners for Sri Lanka, currently the world's largest tea exporter.

Last year's six percent gross domestic product growth has been largely ascribed to growth in the tea sector, which fetched Sri Lanka 34 billion rupees (US$548.4 million) from exports in 1996. Industry officials said that figure was surpassed in October 1997 and last year's earnings would be much higher since tea prices have remained firm in the global market.

Fourteen trade unions are demanding that the daily wages of plantation workers be increased to 105 rupees from the current 83 rupees. Plantation companies have countered with the offer of a 10-rupee hike, saying any more could hurt their profitability and the future of the industry.

Recently privatised after decades of state control, the industry has only just begun showing signs of a turnaround."Demands by plantation trade unions for a 26 percent hike in daily wages of estate workers would cost the industry an additional 2.6 billion rupees a year in basic wages and add about 15 rupees to the cost of production of a kilogram of tea," the Planters' Association of Ceylon (PAC) said in a statement.

The association's secretary-general, S.K.Seneviratne, said the additional wage burden would seriously hamper the ability of companies to service loans and carried-over losses and continue with replanting and factory development. "This is much more than a simple wage issue," he added, calling for government intervention to arrest the economic ramifications of the move.

"A 15 percent hike is what the companies are expecting, but even that would raise their operating costs by between 6-8 percent," said Avanka Herath, plantations analyst with brokerage Jardine Fleming. "The increase the companies are willing to give is al-

ready ringing alarm bells among the smaller plantation firms," said Nanda Nair, research head at John Keells Stock Brckers. He said the recent increase in tea prices was largely because of production problems in Kenya and Indonesia."The unions do not seem to appreciate the fact that commodity prices are beyond our control and can fall overnight. Such a sharp increase cannot be cushioned in such an event," Seneviratne said.

Some analysts in Colombo believe that there was still an outside chance the two sides might reach a settlement as both sides are going to be affected if the strike went ahead.

UNP Urged to Make Common Cause

The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (NPC) has called upon the main opposition United National Party (UNP) join with the Government in a bipartisan approach to the proposed constitutional reform and devolution.

In a press statement issued on 11 December the NPC said, "Justice and Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris's readiness to consider the recent UNP proposal regarding asymmetric devolution is a welcome development after months of uncertainty regarding a bipartisan approach to constitution making. In particular, his invitation to the UNP to put forward the mechanics of its proposal for asymmetric devolution opens the door to joint authorship of the new constitutional system that will work in the north-east as well as the rest of the country.

"The National Peace Council calls on the UNP to make use of this opportunity for the common good. The crisis in the country is too serious for political parties to seek narrow political advantage of the ethnic conflict. The position taken recently by the UNP leadership that it must take institutional responsibility for its past commitments to the devolution of power, including the Gamini Dissanayake manifesto, is a very positive development in this regard.

"By taking collective responsibility for their past commitments, mature political institutions are able to win the trust of other political actors and opponents. This applies equally to the government and opposition political forces, including the LTTE.

"The value of the proposed constitutional restructuring of the state lies in its ability to restore peace and normalcy to the country and to the lives of long suffering people. In its readiness to provide a special status to the north-east, the concept of asymmetric devolution can provide a bridge to the Thimpu principles that the LTTE has presented as its basis for a negotiated political solution."

Escaping an Icy Death

British Customs officers found 16 persons on 29 December hiding under the roof of a lorry importing frozen potato chips from France in an attempt to gain illegal entry into the United Kingdom.

The men, 15 from Sri Lanka and one from Bangladesh, were wedged into a gap of less than two feet (70 cm) between the ceiling of the refrigeration compartment and stacks of boxes of potato chips.

British Home Office junior minister Mike O'Brien said the detained men were extremely lucky to be alive: "These people could easily have met an icy death. They are extremely lucky to be alive thanks to the vigilance of Customs officers.

"This demonstrates yet again the extraordinary and dangerous measures that some people are prepared to take. It shows the appalling lengths that the organisers of this traffic in human desperation are willing to go to in order to make their disreputable living.

"The international organisers of this trade must be stopped. The Government is taking a hard line on illegal immigration. That is why the Immigration Service and the National Criminal Intelligence Service are now working very closely together to uphold our immigration laws. In doing so they are also helping to protect those misguided people who think that by paying their life savings to crime barons they can slip undetected into Britain."

The British driver of the vehicle was interviewed by police on suspicion of being involved in trafficking for illegal immigrants for financial reward.

Exchange Reserve Increases

Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserve reached a record 2.83 billion U.S. dollars by the end of October 1997, up by 22.6 percent from 1996, according to the Central Bank.

The country's foreign exchange reserve is enough to support 5.6 months of imports, the Bank said. Last year Sri Lanka held 2.3 billion dollars in foreign exchange reserve. The Bank attributed the increase to more capital inflows and improvement in the current account of the balance of payments.

Capital inflows were mainly composed of foreign investments, private proceeds and remittances by Sri Lankans abroad. Remittances alone rose from last year's 34 billion Rupees (570 million dollars) to 38 billion Rupees (630 million dollars) by September 1997.

Sri Lanka's trade deficit by the end of October stood at minus 60.7 billion Rupees (1.01 billion dollars), down from minus 62.8 billion Rupees (1.05 billion dollars) of the corresponding period last year. The decline was brought about by a 21.3 percent rise in exports as against a 15 percent increase in imports, the bank said. Exports grew mainly in agricultural and industrial sectors, particularly tea and garments, it added.

Austria to Build Joint-Venture Hospital

Austrian company AME and two Sri Lankan companies, the Shihara Lanka Private Ltd. and the Design Consortium Ltd., have signed a contract to set up a fully equipped hospital near capital city Colombo. The contract was signed recently. Construction of the joint-venture hospital will cost 30 million U.S. dollars. The hospital will be located at Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte, which is 10 kilometers east of Colombo. It will comprise 200 beds, two surgical wards, an obstetrics ward, a gynecology ward and a paediatrics ward. The hospital will install Sri Lanka's first tele-medical facilities.

Port Deal to Go Ahead Amid Protest

In the face of protest by trade unions led by the Ceylon Mercantile Union, Sri Lanka Government is to go ahead with its planned deal to partly-privatise the Colombo port by March 1998 which according to the government was needed to increase the port's trans-shipment handling capacity.

"Our target is March 1998 to sign the agreement and there after the question of handing over comes," Mohammed Ashraff, minister of Port Development, Rehabilitation & Reconstruction told a new conference in Colombo.

The government plans to give a 30-year lease on the Queen Elizabeth Quay (QEQ) to South Asia Gateway Terminals (SAGT), a joint venture between P&O Navigations Australia, P&O Containers (PO.L) of Britain and Sri Lanka's John Keells Holding Ltd (JKH.CM) and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA).

The QEQ project is being criticised by trade unions who have been holding a series of strikes to protest against the project. The Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), whose members make up one-third of the 17,000-strong work-force at Colombo port, says that it would affect the job security of the port workers and result in direct competition within the port between the P&O Consortium and SLPA.

According to Ashraff, the construction will begin by early January 1999 on the $200 million project to expand the capacity of the QEQ from quarter of a million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) to one million TEUs within the next three years. The minister said that the QEQ project on a build, operate, transfer (BOT) basis was needed if Sri Lanka wanted to increase its TEUs handling capacity.

"The Colombo Port is expected to handle over 1.6 million TEUs in 1997 and it could increase this to 1.9 million in 1989 and 2.2 million by 2000," the minister said. "The QEQ project gives us a breathing space to face the challenge, but we need further development if we are to keep the Colombo port south Asia's main trans-shipment hub," Ashraff said. He said that the government had already signed an agreement with Japan's Penta-Ocean Construction Co Ltd (1893.T) to develop the North Pier at the Colombo port which will handle the bulk cargo that is presently handled at QEQ. The 820 million rupee ($13.3 million) North Pier project will take about nine months to complete and would extend the pier by 35 metres, Sri Lanka Ports Authority officials said.

Truck-Bomb Explodes

A truck carrying explosives exploded prematurely on 29 December near Sri Lanka's southern Magalla naval base located in the southern port city of Galle, killing three persons who had been in the truck. The blast occurred at 2.30 a.m. (2130 GMT Saturday) and also damaged a line of eight to ten shops and a couple of houses by the roadside.

Police promptly said it was an attack by the LTTE possibly trying to kill Tissera, who was at the naval base when the truck exploded just 550 yards (500 meters) from the naval base. To reach the navy camp, the truck would have to pass a police checkpoint. They said the truck stopped about 100 yards (90 meters) from a police check post and one of the occupants crawled under it, seemingly to set right a mechanical fault. He was still under the vehicle when the truck exploded. His body was found charred, while limbs belonging to two different persons were found up to 40 meters from the site of the blast. Police said one victim had been wearing a vest laden with explosives.

The police officer said the vehicle bomb seemed to have gone off prematurely and was possibly targeted at the Navy commander Cesil Tissera. Admiral Tissera was attending a musical show for the benefit of the families of dead soldiers. Police officials say the LTTE could have been aiming to get him either at the show or at the base.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga was also scheduled to visit Galle town two days later on 30 December to launch a new loan scheme by the state-owned People's Bank. Tight security measures were to begin on the day of the explosion with cordon and search operations in Galle town prior to the President's visit.

Dispute in LSSP Over Cabinet Portfolio

Following the death of LSSP leader Bernard Soysa, who held the portfolio of Minister of Science and Technology in the Peoples Alliance cabinet, a dispute arose as to whether the LSSP should accept a ministerial post in the cabinet. The opposition to acceptance was led by Vasudeva Nanayakkara who had been expressing opposition to many of the Government's policies, particularly in respect of privatisation of nationalised industries.

The LSSP dispute over the acceptance of a cabinet portfolio is not over yet though the politburo decided recently to nominate acting leader Batty Weerakoon for appointment as a minster.

The party's central committee which met thereafter to discuss the decision was split down the middle with 23 members voting to ratify the politburo decision and 12 opposing it. The voting pattern was the same on a second resolution to ratify the nomination of Mr. Weerakoon as a minister.

The radical Vasudeva Nanayakkara said that he still felt the party should not accept a cabinet portfolio, though it should stay on in the government.

Mr. Nanayakkara and several others in the party feel the LSSP should stay out of the cabinet in view of serious policy differences with government leaders on economic issues such as privatisation.

At the politburo meeting after the policy making body decided to accept the portfolio, two names were proposed Mr. Weerakoon and Deputy Minister Athauda Seneviratne. But Mr. Seneviratne later stood down in favour of Mr. Weerakoon, though ironically he had supported the acceptance of a portfolio while the acting leader initially opposed it.

"A fight that is not fought with intellectual weapons alone disgusts me. The dead oponent attests only to his own death."

- Elias Canetti

OUTCRY AGAINST MURDER IN THE NAME OF RAGGING

More than 20 years after a young woman jumped from the second-floor window of her university dormitory unable to cope with cruel "ragging" (hazing) by her seniors, there is murder on Sri Lanka's campuses.

Rupa Ratnaseeli, who took that death-defying leap, was crippled for life. She now moves around in a wheelchair selling flowers for a living in a southern village.

In November last year, a 21-year-old student was murdered on the campus. Selvanayagam Varapraga-sam, a first-year engineering student, died after a ragging ritual while another student is at death's door and may be permanently disabled - once again triggering a debate on the issue of banning ragging in Sri Lanka. Some students alleged to have been involved in his ragging and eventual death were taken into custody and are facing trial, and some others are still absconding.

Ragging has become brutal, sadistic, even leading to serious medical problems. Varapragasam, despite being a strongly-built youth, was unable to cope with the 300-odd push- ups that the senior students demanded. He began coughing up blood and failed to recover after several days in hospital.

Twenty-two-year-old Thusara Kelum Wijetunga, another "fresh" student at the Hardy Technical Education Institute, died on 29 December from injuries sustained during a brutal ragging. He had been forced by "senior" students to consume excessive quantities of arrack (Sri Lanka's alternative to whisky) and perform a "forward and backward roll". He died when his lungs failed in Kandy General Hospital to which he was admitted in early December in a critical state.

Police have detained over 20 students of the Amparai Hardy Institute of Technology for alleged involvement. The students have been remanded by a magistrate in eastern Amparai until January 23.

Plagued by calls for a ban on ragging, the government appointed a high-level committee to study the issue in depth and recommend draft legislation to stamp out the practice. The committee comprises Professor W D Lakshman, Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo, Savithri Gunasekera, Professor of Law at the Open University and a Deputy Solicitor General.

"Laws are useful but legislation must be the last resort," argues eminent sociologist Professor S.T. Hettige who is among a growing band of university teachers who are against laws banning ragging in the campuses. Hettige, head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Colombo, said that the university system must evolve ways of solving its own problems of which ragging is only one.

"Universities have to address problems faced by students. But unfortunately, the university system does not pay much attention to the problems," he said. But Hettige and his university colleagues are isolated in their opposition to legislation.

The media, politicians and the public - shocked by the recent incidents - have in unison called for a ban on hazing and criminal prosecution of those involved. "The victims have done no harm and the tormentors have nothing to gain except sadistic delight... It is very doubtful that humanity has ever sunk to the depths of perversion as Sri Lankan undergraduates," said a local newspaper editorial, after the latest ragging incident outraged public opinion.

Ragging has been a traditional ritual practised by senior undergraduates on "freshers" in the island's university campuses. However, before the 1970s, ragging was much less painful for freshmen on college campuses. Some of the things they had to do were sing songs, carry the books of seniors, buy them tea in the campus canteen and shave one side of their head.

Dr Lareef Zubair, a former university lecturer, says that students use five types of arguments to support ragging: ragging socialises and orients new students from deprived backgrounds; it helps freshmen find mentors; it brings the arrogance and influence down to size so that others can get along with them; it builds student unity; and even abusive ragging - as long as it does not lead to injuries - is good as it toughens the freshmen.

Dr. Diyanath Samarasinghe, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Colombo, says most victims of ragging are "innocent" village girls, though ragging is intended at cutting to size of "swollen-headed and posh Colombo freshmen."

Samarasinghe says that the views on ragging change from time to time, and trying to prevent ragging through laws could be problematic. He suggested that there should be an open discussion with students to prevent the practice of ragging.

MOOT POINT, A LEGAL REVIEW

The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), an independent public policy institute, launches Moot Point, a journal which reviews important judgementsof courts and other legal developments. The Legal Review is part of CPA's Democracy Monitor Project conducted with assistance from the Asia Foundationwhich seeks to review democratic institutions with a view to facilitating participatory democracy and transparency and accountability in public affairs. Two issues of Moot Point will be published in 1998.

The inaugural issue of Moot Point contains articles on the Vijaya Kumaratunga Commission Report, the Jeyaraj Fernandopulle Case, the Shirani Bandaranayake Appointment Case and the Dissolution of Provincial Councils Case. It also includes comment on Constitutional Interpretation, Public Interest Litigation, Sri Lanka's decision to ratify the Optional Protocol on Civil and Political Rights and the new Commercial High Court. Contributors include Sanaka Samarasinha, Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, Menique Amerasinghe, Savithri Walatara, Sashi Mendis, Anne Marie Caderamenpulle, N. Selvakkumaran and Rohan Edrisinha.

Copies of this Legal Review can be obtained from the Centre for Policy Alternatives. Please feel free to contact us for further details at:

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"Kama Sutra"
Arouses Repressed Sexuality

Three Australian women walked into a cinema in the Sri Lankan capital last month to watch "Kama Sutra," a film based on the fourth century Indian sex manual. Minutes later they were running out of the hall, forced to leave by jeering men in the audience, some of whom had unzipped and were making vulgar gestures.

The uproar led cinema managers to hold three "women's only" shows of Kama Sutra, the first time they took such a stand - sparking a controversy about segregation as a cure to the widespread malaise of sexual harassment.

"Why segregation?" asked journalist and film writer, Karuna Perera. "Do men and women live in two different worlds?" In her opinion, segregation is a "temporary" solution and should not be allowed.

But most feminists are seeing the "women's only" shows as inevitable in a paternalistic society like Sri Lanka. It is a matter of a women's right to be in the cinema, they say.

Last year, cinemas in many Indian towns and cities showed the controversial "Bandit Queen" to only female audiences. The film in Hindi on a low-caste woman who, raped by upper caste men, takes the law into her hands. It has some very violent scenes and the male audience reaction was very similar to that in Colombo. In Mumbai and in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh state, there were mile-long lines of women who wanted to see the film in the safety of the special shows.

According to Sri Lankan activist Eva Ranaweera of the "Voice of Women" group, the aggressive male audience reaction to even mildly sexually-explicit scenes is part of the larger "societal dilemma" facing South Asian cultures.

Though female and male sexuality was written about in ancient texts, even celebrated on panels in temples, it is talked about behind closed doors today. As a result, women suffer all kinds of repression and abuse - incest, wife battering and rape - in the confines of their home.

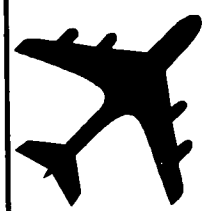
In conservative Sri Lanka, men think a woman who ventures alone to the cinema is promiscuous, says Ranaweera.

Till a few years ago, going to the cinema was a family outing, women did not go unaccompanied. With the advent of television and video films, the audiences in movie halls became mostly male, and the films themselves deteriorated in standard to soft-porn.

Professor S.T. Hettige, head of the sociology department at the University of Colombo, says that cinemas, in a bid to survive, began offering erotica to attract viewers, who are mainly from urban shanties and slums, too poor to afford TV sets.

The strategy clicked, and business boomed again for cinemas. "To the young, it was also an avenue to get away from the problems of daily life," Hettige thinks.

"Sexual, seduction, steamy love scenes", promises a film running in



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The Case for Asymmetrical Devolution

by Neville Jayaweera

The Minister for Constitutional Affairs, Prof. G. L. Peiris, is reported to have said that he is now willing to consider a proposal for asymmetrical devolution. That is good news indeed, glad tidings of great joy and very appropriate for the season too! A great pity though that he waited for almost two years before consenting even to consider the merits of this concept.

Basically, the case for asymmetry is that none of the arguments supporting devolution to the predominantly Tamil provinces are valid for any of the other seven provinces.

The case for devolving power to the predominantly Tamil provinces rests on some fairly self-evident arguments. I shall recount them here so that the reader may see straight away that none of them apply to the rest of the country. They are:

1. The felt need shared overwhelmingly among the Tamil people to govern themselves and articulated by them with increasing conviction over the past forty years.

2. The motivation factor, that is, their willingness to suffer great privations and even to lay down their lives for realising their goal. Their ability stubbornly to defend their cause against the might of the Indian and Sri Lankan armies is proof of the intensity of conviction that motivates them.

3. The need for living space. Continuously humiliated and traumatized through repeated exposure to violence perpetrated on them by rampaging mobs in the South, and even today constantly exposed to the ordeal of suspicion, search and arbitrary arrest, the Tamils require as a necessary condition of their rehabilitation, some space of their own, where they may dwell secure and pursue life's goals in dignity and without fear. Devolution is the minimum condition for fulfilling that need.

4. The moral argument. A people who display almost all the defining characteristics of nationhood, such as, a separate ethnic identity, a separate language, a distinctive belief system, an intense consciousness of being a unique people and the continuous occupancy of a particular territorial space for over a thousand years, have an unarguable moral right to govern themselves, if they so desire.

5. The argument from history. History teaches us that wherever an ethnic minority has for whatsoever reason, developed a strong desire to set themselves up as a separate polity, they have either broken away and set themselves up as an independent state or have at least secured a large measure of self governance within the larger national corpus. The Tamils of Sri Lanka are not an exception to this rule.

6. The argument from expediency and self- interest. Simply put, the attempt to hold down the Tamil people through military power will only accelerate the impoverishment of the Sinhalayo. It is therefore in the interest of their own survival, for the Sinhalayo speedily to end the self-haemorrhaging that has been going on for years.

The singular merit of the governments proposals, that is in so far as they pertain to the Tamil people, is their sincerity and commitment. That notwithstanding, I believe that the proposals have come twenty five years too late - a classic case of bolting the stable doors

The argument that devolution is also intended to secure greater people's involvement in the South comes across as a promotional line, calculated primarily to placate Sinhala opinion into believing that the Tamils are not being afforded some special privileges. Such a disingenuous masking may have had its uses during the times of the BC Pact of '59 and the DC Accord of '66 when the consciousness of the Sinhalayo was much less amenable than now to accepting the hard realities of the ethnic problem.

(continued from page 12)

Colombo this week, that has a kissing couple on the poster. Another billboard advertises the "sexual appetite of one woman who takes on three men in one night."

"Being sexually inactive, they (males) use the cinema as a way of release," Hettige asserts, arguing that the raising of the age of marriage to 28 years for men and 26 years for women has also added to pent-up frustrations.

Veena Jayakody, an award-winning Sri Lankan actress, however, has no sympathy with "these perverts", as she calls jeering male audiences. In her opinion, Kama Sutra is an educational film, and women must be able to watch it freely.

"It is shocking that someone's father, brother or husband should behave in a crude and obscene manner not only at this movie, but also at other 'adults' only' movies," she adds. "It just goes to show that they are waiting for a chance to reveal their perversions."

Journalist and film writer Perera says the answer is to beef-up security, "so that men and women could sit side-by-side and view the movie."

Kama Sutra, named one of the 10 best movies at the 1996 Toronto film festival, is made by India-born Mira Nair. The film has been shown round the world, but not in India where the censors are demanding major cuts in the film, which the director, Nair, director has refused to do.

The film, Perera says, should have focused equally on male and female sexuality, which might have kept the rowdy male audience quiet. But Perera is a lone voice in opposing segregated movies.

Veteran film and TV actress, Iranganie Serasinghe, says "women's only" shows are a very good idea, as Asian women would be embarrassed to sit with their menfolk and watch a movie like Kama Sutra. "When the need arises, segregation may be necessary," she asserts. The cinema owners are happy: all three shows of Kama Sutra were house full, and there was no trouble at all from the "women only" audience.(IPS)

not only after the horses have fled but after the stable itself has collapsed!

Non-issue

Be that as it may, where the government's proposals concern the rest of the country, they seem to be addressing a non-issue. If we look again at the arguments that justify devolution to the North and the East we see straight-away that none of them are issued in the other seven provinces. This means that we have to work out a separate set of arguments to justify devolution to the South.

We can think of at least a dozen issues which for decades have be-devilled the South which should have a much higher claim on the government's attention and which, devolution far from solving, is only likely to aggravate. The assumption that the insertion of another layer of politicians and bureaucrats into the system will help to solve these problem misses the point that most of them remain unsolved not for lack of more politicians but for lack of resources - financial, technological and human and not least, because of the demoralization wrought through political interference.

As far as I am aware, except for the somewhat nebulous claim that devolution to these provinces will provide opportunities for greater peoples' involvement and promote participatory democracy, there has been no rigorously worked out rationale' for country wide devolution.

It is perhaps relevant to recall, that had not the Tamil people put pressure on successive governments, year after year, demanding devolution there would never have been any proposals for devolution, either to the North or to the South. The catalyst for devolution has never been the need to secure peoples' involvement or to widen the democratic base of the country. Rather, the catalyst has always been the ethnic issue, the need somehow to solve the problem of the Tamil people.

The argument that devolution is also intended to secure greater people's involvement in the South comes across as a promotional line, calculated primarily to placate Sinhala opinion into believing that the Tamils are not being afforded some special privileges. Such a disingenuous masking may have had it's uses during the times of the BC Pact of '59 and the DC Accord of '66 when the consciousness of the Sinhalayo was much less amenable than now to accepting the hard realities of the ethnic problem.

I venture to think that thirty to forty years on, the Sinhalayo have a more mature understanding of the nature of the conflict and are capable of making a decision on the question of devolution to the Tamil people, for or against, regardless of whether or not devolution to the South is also thrown in as a crumb.

I must reiterate that there has never been a demand for devolution to the predominantly Sinhala provinces either from the grass roots, or from any of the mainstream political parties in the South, except perhaps the spurious proposal for a Federated Ceylon submitted by some Kandyan chiefs in the early nineteen thirties. That was hardly a call for more peoples' involvement. Therefore, in the absence of a clearly identifiable and spontaneous demand rising out of the people, the principal case for devolution to the South disappears. Far from being an enlightened response to a popular demand, devolution to the South then becomes a costly imposition.

However, let us look seriously at the claim that devolution to the South will result in greater peoples' involvement and produce more democracy. We can look at this claim at a theoretical level as well as on the basis of recent experience.

Theory

Theoretically it is correct that without devolving power to the people a nation cannot effectively secure their involvement in the democratic process. On the other hand it is also true that constitutional provisions and new political structures do not by themselves generate peoples' involvement. Making constitutional provisions and setting up new structures represent an external or objective activity whereas securing peoples' involvement is an internal and subjective activity requiring for its fulfilment more than constitutional provisions or a new set of structures.

Worldwide experience has shown that peoples' involvement and grass roots democracy are primarily a function of a mature political consciousness rather than of legal provisions and political structures. That is to say, unless the people have attained a mature political consciousness they will not be able effectively to benefit from the new structures.

The level of consciousness I have in mind is more than the peoples' willingness, once in every five or six years to cast their vote for the candidate of their choice. I have in mind a mature understanding among the people of the issues that concern their well-being and their willingness to embrace the duties and responsibilities that go with their membership in society as much as their readiness to claim its' rights and privileges.

Sadly what has passed for democracy in Sri Lanka, both at the centre as well as at the periphery, has been the imposition of layer upon layer of politicians upon the shoulders of the people who having cast their votes once in five or six years are either reduced to the status of spectators or keep pestering their elected representatives for individual preferment and special privileges. Consequently far from being actively involved in making mature decisions that concern their well-being people have been used primarily as stepping stones by upwardly mobile politicians. That is hardly what peoples' involvement means.

People's involvement is best secured neither through constitutional provisions nor via representative structures but through consciousness raising, an activity which requires patient and dedicated work by groups of highly motivated individuals, who are prepared to live among the people for long periods of time, without expecting rewards, either in the form of election to office or in the form of monetary gain.

If the government is seriously bent on promoting peoples' involvement, without which, I agree, there can be no effective democracy, it has fully to reconceptualise its' devolution strategy and instead of placing another layer of politicians and bureaucrats on the peoples' shoulders, must go right down to the grass roots and start working from there. However that is not a task for politicians. Rather, it is the province of dedicated NGOs.

Recent experience

Let us use our recent experience from which to look at the claim that devolution is good and desirable for the South, where we have had a substantial dose of it for a whole decade. That is a long enough period of time, a veritable laboratory in fact, from which we may draw data and guidance on the efficacy of devolved governance in the South.

In relation to this experience we can

ask two sets of questions. One set of questions should address issues the answers to which are quantifiable. They pertain essentially to cost benefits. Are the returns in respect of selected developmental tasks, such as infrastructure development and agricultural output, commensurate with the sharp rise in admin costs? What lessons can we glean from the indicators in the education and health sectors as well as the small industries sector? Has there been a substantial rise in employment as a result of initiatives taken by the local Provincial Council? All these questions can be answered fairly accurately if the government is truly concerned about making decisions on the basis of hard evidence rather than on the basis of conjecture.

The second set of questions focuses on an area that is even more crucial, namely, testing the peoples' own perceptions of how their Provincial Councils have performed, during the past ten years. I felt that before drafting the devolution proposals for the predominantly Sinhala areas the government should have taken some time asking questions from the people themselves, because after all isn't it for securing "peoples' involvement" that the whole devolution exercise is being undertaken! We would like to know from the people — does provincial governance show more cohesion and greater effectiveness after the 13th Amendment devolution than before? Do the people feel that they have had a greater say in the making of decisions that concern their well-being? Do they feel that the administration has responded to their needs with more understanding? Above all what do the people think about the incidence of corruption and the abuse of office and privilege?

Before embarking on a radical overhaul of the structures of provincial governance, any government that has the long-term interests of the country at heart, should seek answers to these questions in a systematic way and be guided by them, rather than be led by tactical or political considerations only. By "systematic" I do not mean a political instrument such as a referendum which is invariably distorted by propaganda which precedes it, but a series of sample studies carried out by some independent research organizations. One would have thought that Prof. G. L. Peiris, more than anyone else in the government, might have seen the need for such a process before formulating proposals for fundamental structural reforms.

Way out

The case for asymmetry is simply this - that in the absence of a self-evident and overwhelming case for devolution in the South as there is for devolution to the North and the East, and until such time as systematic studies provide us with data showing that devolved governance in the seven predominantly Sinhala provinces during the past ten years has been an unqualified success, it is best to put further devolution to these provinces on hold, say for another ten or fifteen years. In the interim period, one way out may be to stagger devolution both in terms of provinces and in terms of functions. Another interim arrangement may be to resort to more delegation and greater decentralisation rather than go for all out devolution.

Some have argued that since corruption, mismanagement and inefficiency are already widespread we should not adduce their likely proliferation as a ground for withholding further devolution. I disagree most heartily. If these evils are already widespread, as indeed they are, instead of devising strategies for containing and possibly eradicating them, as the government's manifesto said would be the case upon their election to office, why provide opportunities now, under the mask of devolution, for making them irremediable and entrenching them in our culture for all time. As the Sinhala folk wisdom admonishes, "why provide ladders to jumping monkeys"?

Prognosis

Lastly, in support of my view that devolution to the South should be put on hold or staggered over a ten to fifteen year period, I would like to adduce an argument that will seem downright chauvinistic. Sooner or later, the Tamils of the North and the East will wrest from the Sri Lankan state either an outright separation or at least a substantial measure of devolution almost tantamount to separation. Within a decade of that event, or sooner, whether the Sinhala South likes it or not, the North and the East will emerge as one of the most vibrant sectors of the island, politically as well as in terms of the economy. When that happens it will not be in the interest of the Sinhala South to have to confront the newly invigorated and robust Tamil polity as a congeries of fragmented, fractions and debilitated Regions. If the Sinhala polity is to match the newly emerging Tamil polity, it will have to be a fully integrated and dynamic whole, I believe that further devolution in the South will seriously diminish that prospect.

Another spectre is haunting the heartland of Sri Lanka but it is not the spectre of Prabakaran. It is the spectre of the plantation Tamils. Today the attitude of the Sinhala leaders towards the plantation Tamils is no different from what it was towards the problem of the Sri Lankan Tamils in the 60s and 70s - lackadaisical, somnolent and ostrich like, hoping that somehow the problem will go away if ignored sufficiently long. The problem of the Tamils of the North and the East did not go away then and much less will the problem of the plantation Tamils go away now. To the contrary, I make bold to say that unless radical measures are taken now to integrate the plantation Tamils into the Sri Lankan polity in an organic way, the problem will erupt with a ferocity that will make our escapades with Messrs.. Wijeweera and Prabakaran look like a teddy bear's picnic. I feel that further devolution in the South will hasten this outcome. If events work out the way I fear they will, it will be curtains for Sri Lanka, our grand denouement!

I recall that when I was the Govt. Agent of the Jaffna District I addressed memorandum after memorandum to the governments of the day in Colombo pleading for an early reconciliation with the Tamil people while it was yet possible. That was in the mid 60s.!! I might as well have addressed my pleas to mountain of basalt, for all the response I was able to evoke in Colombo! We are still living through the aftermath! I believe there is a lesson here for those who have ears to hear!

The matters in issue are far too critical to allow of partisan politics. We have to disregard the demands of tactical politics and take the larger view. It seems to me that nothing is really lost by following a step by step approach in respect of further devolution to the seven predominantly Sinhala provinces. To use a homely metaphor, it is rather like adding salt to the curry. Once you put it you cannot recall it, even if it is in excess. It is therefore best to go sip by sip! ●

Can We Make Peace in Sri Lanka?

Dr. N. Shanmugaratnam

'This is my karma. Otherwise how do you explain my misery of being displaced three times? I am so sick and tired of running for safety, I do not care whether Rama rules or Ravana rules but I want peace and I want the Sinhala and Tamil armies out of my life', a displaced Tamil farmer in Mannar (September 1997)

'They say there are only a few Tigers left yet they seem to suspect every Tamil to be a Tiger', a religious dignitary in the East (December 1997)

'This war is not going to end. I am staying on because I am assigned to this checkpoint. The moment I am ordered to go to the front I will leave and go to my village in Kandy and cultivate the little paddy land we have.' - a young, affable soldier in Vavuniya (January 1997), who reminded me of my own 24 year old son and to whom I said 'putha (son), do what you think is right'.

'General Ratwatte and Major Munasinghe have to get their arithmetic right. If one adds up their figures of Tigers dead and wounded and matches the total against their other claim that there were only five thousand Tigers, even Prabakaran and his bodyguards should not be existing today and the war should have been over. Nobody here believes the official figures and I do not think people in the South believe them either. The outside world doesn't seem to care as to what is going on here. Then, for whom are these numbers meant? You know this simply shows that they (the government) don't care what the public thinks', a retired public servant in Vavuniya (September 1997)

Is it so bad? Well, one's answer would vary according to one's viewpoint and personal experiences. I do not think truth is dead but we have considerable difficulty getting the information to form a total picture of the war-torn North-East. The government has banned any independent on-the-spot reporting on the ongoing 'war for peace' and it regularly produces its own reports which normally say that the Sri Lankan troops are either advancing or consolidating 'liberated' areas and provide statistics about casualties on both sides. The LTTE issues its daily reports which, as to be expected, give a different picture. These reports contradict the claims, including the statistics, of the government. Those who want to verify the validity of the conflicting stories told by the two parties at war and go beyond to know the deeper reality in the North-East would have to seek information from other sources and if possible visit the war-torn region.

The government claims that not even 10 percent of the war is left to be fought. Anyone who has some first hand knowledge of the situation in the North-East and reliable information on the fighting capacity of the LTTE and its logistical backstopping cannot help dismissing this as foolhardy and cheap propaganda. The UNP, the main opposition party, has consistently rejected the government's claim too. And now the pro-LTTE *Tamil Guardian International* and *Hot Spring* published in London and the Tamil Net News in the internet are countering the official reports and statistics with their own. They challenge the government to allow international journalists to visit the North-East and freely report on the situation. The government has yet to accept this challenge. If the present war is actually a war for peace as claimed by the government, it is its moral duty - in the name of the peace for which it says it has been forced to continue the war - to permit uncensored reporting by different sources. Its failure to do so makes its claim suspect and, moreover, casts serious doubt on its commitment to freedom of the press and to the security of civilians.

As one who has been able to visit several parts of the North-East except Jaffna on more than five different occasions since mid-1995, I am reasonably convinced that the ordinary Tamil people do not see this war as a war for peace. Tamils do know that it was the LTTE that broke the ceasefire and opened the way for war again, but as to how the war started is no longer a big issue for them. The various operations launched by the government with the aim of marginalising the LTTE have only escalated the war, increased civilian suffering and alienated the Tamil people from the government. The LTTE has suffered major setbacks but it has not been marginalised at all. On the other hand, the losses suffered by the people and the daily hardships they have to endure have shattered their hopes for peace. I also saw for myself the appalling conditions under which people were living in the so called transit camps in Vavuniya. The people in these camps are treated like suspects of a crime. The truth about their situation and the procedure to deal with it have been clearly stated in the report of the US Committee on Refugees (March 1997, page 34):

'The Sri Lankan government induced those now detained in welfare centres to cross into Vavuniya by promising them assistance and not telling them that they would not be allowed to settle in Vavuniya town or travel to Colombo. It was and remains *unfair and unnecessary* for the government to detain them. It should complete security screening of all the detainees and allow all those who are cleared to move out of the centres to destinations of their choice. They are displaced Sri Lankan citizens, not criminals. The government should treat them accordingly.' (my italics)

These detainees felt cheated by the government because they had trusted its words and moved into Vavuniya with the idea of either settling in there or going to Colombo. Perhaps they believed that, since it appeared keen on winning the hearts and minds of the Tamils, the government would assist them to relocate to places of their choice. This was not to be and their experience turned out to be yet another tale of suffering and indignity. *'Unfair and unnecessary'* would be an appropriate description of many procedures adopted by the government and the treatment of civilians by its military apparatus in the name of security clearance. There are also numerous stories about corruption at all levels of the state's armed forces and police.

When Tamils overwhelmingly

voted for Chandrika Kumaratunge in 1994 and openly celebrated her victory and affectionately called her their President to the chagrin of the LTTE, they were sending an important message: 'we are willing to be a part of a united country if we can live in peace and with dignity'. To these people, the present war is different from the wars they had experienced in the past only in the sense that it is more intense, more brutal and more widespread. The displacements caused by the various operations and the consequent deprivation, destitution and traumatisation of people are unprecedented. In the words of a displaced person, 'true we don't have to pay taxes to the boys now but we have also lost our livelihood and become dependent on relief'. According to a recent (December 1997) report by a group of Christian relief workers, 300, 000 out of the 485,000 people in the Wanni are displaced. I was told by officials in Mannar that more than 60 percent of the residents of Mannar district were displaced. Many displaced families in Mannar do not receive even the basic dry ration from the government which in its concern to prevent food supplies reaching the Tigers seems to have overlooked the needs of these victims of the war. Infant and maternity mortality rates have gone up in the uncleared areas. Malaria and waterborne diseases are taking their toll on the old and the young. The numbers of female-headed households and orphans have increased. I have spoken to several traumatised young poor war widows (18-25 years of age) who are mothers of small children and who do not know how to rebuild their lives. The population of non-school-going children is on the increase too. In the Wanni region, some 40, 000 children of school-going age are not attending school. There is an acute shortage of trained teachers and health workers in the North-East outside the Jaffna district. Currently not even a sixth of the 590 SLES (Sri Lanka Education Service) officers assigned to the North-East are actually at their posts. The landscape of many parts of the Wanni has been transformed into bunkers, (defence) bunds and security areas. In fact, some of the bunkers have been erected on bunds of irrigation tanks and large quantities of coconut, palmyrah and other trees have been felled to construct bunkers all over the Wanni.

Is it hard to believe that people living in such conditions have difficulty imagining that their sufferings are the price to be paid for a peace that the present war is supposed to bring some day? On the other hand, it is these people who are dying for peace more than anybody else. Of course, the whole of Lanka is yearning for peace including the young Kandyan Sinhalese soldier I spoke to in Vavuniya and many others like him in the Sri Lankan army and, I am reasonably certain, most of those Tamil boys and girls who have joined the armed struggle as a last resort. The question, however, is how are we going to find peace?

'War for Peace' Strategy and the Current Impasse

One cannot help harking back to the moment of 1994 - that conjuncture when the forces of peace and reconciliation were at a peak, when people of all communities were inspired to believe in the possibility of an end to the war and a lasting solution to the national crisis. The main plank of the peace platform was that in the name of uniting the country the war had actually divided it and the only way to reunite it was to make peace on the basis of a political solution that met the aspirations of the Tamil speaking people. Ms Chandrika Kumaratunge's resounding victory was an affirmation of the people's will to find a negotiated settlement that would put the war and the dark years of violations and brutalisation behind us. But this was not to be. That moment of hope vanished in April 1995 and since then the new project of 'war for peace' has been unfolding with an ever increasing fury. Now the government is making a 'war for peace' to liberate the Tamils from the LTTE and unite the country! And the LTTE, which unilaterally called off the ceasefire in April 1995, is making war to liberate the Tamil nation from Sinhala rule by creating a separate state! Was 1994 an aberration? Is war the normal state of affairs in the North-East?

It would seem that the government finds itself in a political and military impasse. The LTTE has firmly rejected the government's devolution package. The UNP, the main opposition party, has rejected it too and, more recently, its leader has come out in favour of asymmetrical devolution which is likely to be more appealing than the PA's package to the Tamil speaking people. However, the UNP does not seem willing to cooperate with the government to workout a solution based on asymmetric devolution. It would appear that the intention behind the radical pronouncement of the UNP leader is not to co-operate with but to oppose the PA. I will only be delighted to be proved wrong. The Sinhala extremist fringe has been making the most vociferous opposition to the package thanks to the encouragement it enjoys from the non-government mainstream press. To the credit of the PA, it must be said that its popular campaign for the package has made a significant impact among the Sinhalese in the South. Devolution is no more a totally alien and misunderstood matter in the South although government campaigners have avoided associating it in a principled manner with federalism or Tamil national self-determination. That the Sinhalese people by and large favour a political solution is not surprising since they had voted for it already in 1994 and I dare say that they would have given their assent to the original devolution proposals of August 1996 which was more secular and which offered greater regional autonomy. The subsequent whittling down of these proposals to produce the present package was not a response to any mass opposition in the South. It was meant to appease certain groups within and outside the SLFP including the communalist sections of Buddhist clergy.

The present package has not raised any visible widespread enthusiasm among the Tamil people, particularly in the North-East for which it is meant to grant some measure of autonomy on a similar basis as that of the other regions (which are not ethnically defined). The reasons for this are not hard to find. First of all, the Tamil people do not believe that a devolution package that is rejected by the LTTE can ever be implemented in the North-East. Another important factor which operates deeply at a psychological level is their memory that past 'Sinhalese governments' have repeatedly failed to honour pacts and promises concerning their basic rights. But the most important reason is the daily reality of life in the war-torn North-East. The war as experienced by the ordinary masses negates any hope for peace the proposed constitutional reforms may contain. That several hundreds of Tamil youths disappeared in Jaffna during the first year after *operation riviresa* is in itself a sad and telling indictment on the PA. The Amnesty

International Report (November 1997) has documented the horrifying cases of torture and murder of Tamil youths by the Sri Lankan security forces. About 600 persons had disappeared in a period of six months in 1996 after the so called liberation of Jaffna. With such a shameful record of violations in such a short time, the government cannot expect to win the confidence of the Tamil people. I tend to think that these disappearances would not have been that high had the government allowed media people freer access to Jaffna and other parts of the North-East to report on the war situation. I wonder if the goverment is prepared to concede its folly even at this late stage.

The 'war for peace' is the government's answer to what it sees as the intransigence of the LTTE. Its aim is to weaken and if possible annihilate the LTTE and thereby clear the ground for the enforcement of the devolution package. In other words, an irreversible military victory over the LTTE is a necessary condition for the government to enforce its package. However, the ground realities force us to question the wisdom of the choice made by the government. Informed analysts who are critical of General Ratwatte's military approach and operations say that the government cannot win the present war against the LTTE. Even government sources say that an armed force of 300, 000 fighters would be needed to crush the Tigers as a military force. This means that the Sri Lankan military will have to triple its present size. But that is just a quantitative projection. In qualitative terms the growth has to be more than that if any armed force were to defeat the Tigers and force them to lay down arms - a condition on which General Ratwatte insists for any talks between his government and the LTTE. At the current rates of recruitment, desertion and casualties, it does not seem realistic that the government will be able to triple its military capacity in the foreseeable future. One does not have to be a military expert to see this point and I am making it not in favour of a larger military strategy but to illustrate the *reductio ad absurdum* of the government's approach.

When we move beyond the narrow militarist premises of the 'war for peace' project and consider its social and political costs, the prospects turn gloomier. The full cost of the war cannot be quantified in monetary terms but common sense is enough to figure out that an increasing defence expenditure implies increasing destruction and loss of growth and development opportunities. The real cost is a multiple of the defence budget and we must not forget that death, human incapacitation, trauma and social dislocation can never be fully translated into money values. Any military strategy aimed at defeating a movement like the LTTE cannot have a definite time-frame as the LTTE has proven capacity to protract the war and to extend it to various parts of the North-East and beyond. A protracted war means not only the agonising death of the political solution the government may want to implement but also ever rising human and economic losses, cancerous growth of the gun culture, which has already assumed horrendous proportions, and social disintegration. It also means the progressive loss of legitimacy for the government in the North-East. Prolonged control of Tamil speaking areas by a Sinhala speaking army, which virtually replaces or relegates to the background the (Tamil speaking) civil administration, cannot help any government to win the hearts and minds of the public. The Sri Lankan military is not multiethnic; the presence of a few token Tamils and Muslims cannot make it multiethnic. Even the police force is predominantly Sinhala speaking and, according to a press report, a recent attempt by the government to recruit 500 Tamil speaking policewomen in Jaffna was a total failure as there was only one applicant. Having been excluded for decades, Tamil youths are not willing to join the military or police at this point in time since they are only too aware of the hazards it entails.

Ironically, the 'war for peace' has helped the LTTE to enhance its legitimacy at the expense of the other Tamil political parties. After the Sri Lankan military's capture of Jaffna, which was celebrated with great medieval pomp by General Ratwatte, the humiliated LTTE reverted to guerilla warfare and more active ideological campaigning. In the past two years, through a series of daring, dramatic military operations, the Tigers have considerably regained their image as a fighting force. They have also been publicising their reasons for rejecting the government's devolution package (which was not formally sent to them). The Voice of Tigers keep telling the Tamil people that the LTTE would take Jaffna back at any cost. LTTE infiltration of Jaffna is growing exponentially and along with it the harassment of civilians by the state's armed forces. People living in the North-East including Jaffna know that the LTTE is very much there whether they like it or not and they have to adapt to the precarious conditions of life under two armies fighting each other with scant concern for civilian lives. They know that the war is not more than 90 per cent finished by any means but it has become more widespread with the dangerous prospect of escalating further and causing them more hardship. In these circumstances, the Tamil people are not naïve to believe that Tamil parties which live at the sufferance of the government in Colombo can bring peace, however much they may disapprove of the LTTE's sectarian fratricidal militarism which was responsible for the plight of these parties.

An ethnicised war deepens communalisation and promotes the erosion of trust between the different communities. This is why the peace movement of 1994 said that the war had actually divided the country and an end to it was a precondition for reunification. Today the war has further deepened the insecurity and ethnic consciousness of the people. The hundreds of thousands of displaced people in the North-East cannot forget that their humiliation, deprivation and destitution have everything to do with their ethnicity. Their freedom to move around has been heavily curtailed. At security checkpoints, one is often asked: are you Sinhalese or Tamil? I have faced this question numerous times during my travels from Colombo to the North-East and back and in the North-East. It makes no sense to call yourself a Sri Lankan at a security checkpoint. Such a category does not exist in Sri Lanka's security lexicon at present. There are only Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese and foreigners. 'National identity card' is a misnomer because it really serves as an ethnic identity card. The checkpoints are needed because of the war and ethnic identities are checked for security reasons: almost all Tigers are Tamils and therefore all Tamils have to be checked and questioned more thoroughly. This simple circular logic of the procedure generates complex psychological consequences which serve to further deepen the ethnic divide. While security procedures directly serve the

reinforcement of one's ethnic consciousness in a divisive way, the slogan *'one country one people'* coined by the government denies our diversity by collapsing all ethnic identities into an amorphous category of 'one people' which has an assimilationist ring. Both the war and the official slogan do not allow us to seek unity in diversity and invent a larger common identity.

The government has not taken steps to encourage the creation of multiethnic symbols. Instead, it expects all non-Sinhala Lankans to accept the Lion flag as the national flag. Is it not a contradiction to grant constitutional privilege to Buddhism (the essence of which is universality of the human being, non-violence, compassion and peace) and at the same time have a lion armed with a sword (an aggressive, violent ethno-mythical symbol) as the centrepiece of the national flag? Perhaps, Sinhala Buddhist nationalists do not see any such contradiction. But what about the sensitivities of other Lankans? Like the other advocates of a secular state for Sri Lanka, I am opposed to any religion being given a higher status than others in the constitution and I am for a flag which all Lankans can proudly and happily wave without being coerced.

Against the violations and sufferings imposed by the war, what does the government have to show by way of actual positive actions to make the Tamil speaking people feel that the government is really serious about their rights and security as citizens? Not much, disappointingly little compared to the promises given and the expectations raised, I am afraid. Take for instance the language rights of the Tamil speaking people. In the past three years, there has been some talk by the government about implementing Tamil as an official language. There were reports that the President had issued a directive to the bureaucracy to take immediate steps towards that end. It appears that the treasury had said that it did not have the funds to recruit a sufficient number of personnel proficient in Tamil to the various departments to meet the needs of Tamil speaking citizens. If this is true, Tamil speaking Lankans are fully justified in feeling that the government is not sensitive enough to one of their basic rights while it is able to find billions of rupees to implement its military strategy. The PA government had plenty of time and opportunities to win the confidence of the Tamil speaking people in the South, particularly in major multiethnic areas like Colombo and the upcountry. The least it could have done was to fully enable them to carry out their transactions with state institutions in their own language. But this has yet to happen and by its failure the government missed one of the first opportunities it had to demonstrate to the Tamil speaking people that it really cared about their rights. The sad reality in our country is that military priorities override everything else when it comes to the rights of the Tamil speaking people. This again takes us back to the challenge of finding the will and the way to end the war.

Thinking About Peace

One day in December 1996, I had a heart to heart talk with three young fishermen on the Kallaru beach in Batticaloa. It did not take much time for them to take me into confidence and open up. One of them was 21 years old and was already married and a father of a child. He told me that he got married early for security reasons. Round-ups by the army are so common in that area and young unmarried men were at greater risk of being taken than their married counterparts. Early marriages are more common nowadays for this reason as well, the young men told me. I asked them if they thought this war would come to an end soon. All three of them said that they did not think it would as long as the government and the LTTE did not enter into serious negotiations. About one year earlier, I had put the same question to some Muslims of Kattankudy with whom I spent several hours discussing Tamil-Muslim relations after they had shown me the two mosques in which dozens of Muslims at prayer were massacred in cold blood by suspected LTTE gunmen. Their answer was the same but they expressed their legitimate concerns about Muslim-Tamil relations. Again I raised the question with some old Tamil and Muslim friends when I happened to be in Batticaloa in December 1997. The answer was the same, i. e. the war cannot be ended without the government and the LTTE talking to each other. Peace is unthinkable to Tamils and Muslims in the North-East without the two warring parties agreeing to talk and finding a compromise. This is also the view of all the non-LTTE Tamil parties and even the UNP.

The importance of Tamil-Muslim harmony to peace in the North-East cannot be overemphasised. More than 70, 000 Muslims were displaced overnight when they were evicted from their homes in Jaffna and Mannar by the LTTE in 1990. Most of them are still languishing in refugee camps in Puttalam. I am personally aware that several Muslims thrown out of Jaffna are living in other parts of the country with their friends and relatives. Some of them were begging in the streets of Colombo. All these Muslims have made it clear that they will not return to their homes without a guarantee for their security from the LTTE which, in my view, should not only provide and honour that guarantee but also show its repentance and pay compensation to all the evicted families. Jaffna cannot be Jaffna without its Muslim community which has contributed to the culture and economy of the peninsula far in excess of its size. Muslim communities in the East are weary of being dependent on the Sri Lankan army and 'Home Guards' for protection. They desire a permanent end to the prevailing Tamil-Muslim tensions in the East. Muslim farmers and land owners displaced from Paduvankarai in Batticaloa want to return to their lands and they too need a security guarantee from the LTTE.

The most important question is how can a sustainable peace process be initiated. I do not think it can be done without facilitation by a third party trusted by the government, LTTE and UNP. I am not the only Lankan who thinks so because I know many Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims who share this view. The chief reason for such a view is that there is need to build a bridge of trust between the two parties who accuse each other of duplicity. A widely held view in Sri Lanka and abroad is that the LTTE cannot be trusted as a peace making partner because it will not settle for anything less than a separate Tamil state and it would use an opportunity for talks as a respite to regroup its forces to continue the war. Indeed this is the dominant view within the PA government. LTTE's past behaviour lends justification to this view. The LTTE says that it would consider a federal alternative to secession but it also says that 'Sinhala governments' cannot be trusted as they have always dishonoured the pacts they signed with the Tamil leadership in the past and that the present government is even worse than the previous ones because it is determined to militarily de-

feat and politically marginalise the LTTE. Moreover, the Tigers have also been critical of the PA government's handling of the peace talks in 1995. They point at the government's failure to send a high powered delegation which included one or two senior ministers. The same observation has been made by several other sources including some who were involved in the peace talks.

Meaningful peace talks are not feasible in such a state of mutual distrust between the government and the LTTE and as long as the PA and the UNP do not agree to stop playing petty politics at the expense of the future of Lanka. The LTTE has to show convincing signs about its willingness to make peace and honour it and to change into a political organisation that can function according to the rules of a multiparty democracy in the post-conflict era. It ought to understand that failure to do so will serve no constructive purpose but only reinforce its sectarian image and further its international isolation to the detriment of the collective interests of the Tamil people. PA should be prepared to consider asymmetric devolution and power sharing at the centre to create a firm institutional foundation for a united Lanka. UNP should become politically more consistent and show its commitment to peace and asymmetric devolution by extending its active support to efforts towards that end.

All this may sound unattainable but the challenge is to make it all happen and it is worth making yet another try. We need to revive and strengthen the peace movement into a powerful mass campaign that can force the two warring parties accept external assistance to create the necessary initial conditions for trust building and a fair and flexible framework to begin negotiations. The peace movement should also get the UNP to support such a process. Several eminent statesmen and friendly countries have offered to help us make peace and find a lasting solution to the national question. Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Yassar Arafat and countries like Switzerland, Canada, Australia, Norway and Britain have expressed their willingness to assist. However, Sri Lankan government spokespersons have sought to spurn these offers on the ground that ours is an internal problem. They would do well to remember that this internal problem has turned into one of the bloodiest civil wars in the world today and spilled over beyond the bounds of our little island home. They cannot close their eyes to the fact that it is the sheer scale of human degradation and losses, the external effects of this militarised internal problem and the inability of successive governments to find a viable solution that have made those outsiders become concerned about our domestic affairs. What is needed is the courage to admit that external help is necessary to decisively move towards peace and a feasible political solution.●

Proposed Constitutional Reform Does Not Meet Tamil Aspirations

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The PA government tabled its constitutional reforms in Parliament on 27 October 1997. It is the third republican constitution that will come into force if it were passed by a two-thirds majority in Parliament and ratified by the people at a referendum.

The question is whether these proposals would create a sense of an all-Sri Lankan nationalism. Will Sinhala nationalism and Tamil nationalism wither? The answer is in the negative. The Tamil nationalism has rejected the proposals because they have not accommodated the *'Thimbu Principles'* which are outlined below:

1. That the Sri Lankan Tamils be recognised as a distinct nationality;

2. That the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka be recognised as the historical and traditional homeland of the Sri Lankan Tamil People; and

3. That the right of the Sri Lankan Tamils to self-determination be acknowledged.

In Sri Lanka the PA Government and the UNP see devolution as a device to deal with the Tamil nationalism in the false hope that it will defuse separatist feeling. It is a way of alleviating political discontent in the North/East provinces without undermining the unity of Sri Lanka. In this context the UNP in November 1987 adopted the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution which devolved powers to eight regions, including the merged North/East provinces as one region. These Councils are still in place. However, this amendment has failed to stop the war to date thus proving that the concept of devolution is falling short of Tamil aspirations.

Devolution vs Federalism

Devolution is a form of unitary government in which the central government delegates certain limited legislative and executive powers to the regions. The regions so created constitutionally have no separate sovereignty because the sovereignty is undivided and rests solely with the central government. Therefore, the power of the regions can be revoked or partially withdrawn at the will of the central government.

Advanced types of devolution based on the Kilbrandon Commission Report - Minority Report's Proposals in the UK in 1970s have the following features: *(Bernard Burrows and Geoffrey Denton, Devolution or Federalism? Options for a United Kingdom, 1980).*

1. establishment of assemblies for all the regions;

2. the established regional assemblies to have greater legislative and executive powers over a wide range of matters;

3. the regional assemblies to be represented in the Upper House;

4. the Upper House to ensure that the rights conferred on the regional assemblies and executives are not interfered with by the Parliament or by the National Executive; and

5. the ultimate power of parliament, acting alone, to amend or end the system would remain unaffected.

The countries that devolved powers to their autonomous regions are Spain, Italy, France, China etc.

Federalism on the other hand involves a 'Union without unity', a division of power between the centre and the constituent regions. A federal system has two system of governments - the centre and the regions - both exist on the basis of equality, both act directly on the people within their own spheres of authority and neither has powers to encroach on the authority of the other. The sovereignty in a federal system is divided between the two governments.

A federal system requires a complete overhaul of the constitutional structure since the consent of all the regions is essential to enact it. A federal system, once established, is difficult to reverse. The amendment to the federal constitution requires the participation of the regions, thus removing the monopoly of the central government in the amendment process.

The countries that claim to be federal are the USA, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico in America; Ethiopia in Africa; Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Russia in Europe; and India, Pakistan, Malaysia in Asia.

Constitutional Reforms

A. Minimalist model

The current Sri Lankan exercise in devolution is a minimalist model. The model grants a limited degree of regional self-government with the clear supremacy of the Centre remaining unchallenged. It is imperative to examine some features flowing from the current reforms with those of non-federal countries that have devolved powers to their regions. Of course, it does not mean that the models evolved by these countries suit Sri Lanka.

Prof. G.L. Peiris, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, when he addressed the members of the diplomatic corps at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Tuesday, January 30, 1996, said, "... *You cannot do this unless you change Article 2 and Article 76. ... It means that until you change those two Articles you cannot have devolution in any meaningful, substantial or pragmatic way. The whole thing will be an exercise in futility. That is why we are committed to a departure from Article 2 and Article 76*". The PA government which has failed to delete the provisions of Article 76, has in fact transferred these provisions to Article 92 of the proposed Constitution. However, Article 2 - *The Republic of Sri Lanka is a unitary state* - seems to have been removed. It is noted that the removal of the label 'unitary' does not mean anything. It is now justified to identify the proposed devolution as meaningless, minimalist or empty rhetoric. The PA government has taken a complete about turn within two years. Can the Tamils rely on the word of a Sinhalese politician?

The delegation of legislative power of Parliament and Regional Council is spelt out in the following Articles. It clearly demonstrates that the elected regional councils are subordinate to Central Parliament.

92 (1) Parliament shall not abdicate or in any manner alienate its legislative power, and shall not set up any authority with any legislative power.

(2) It shall not be a contravention of the provisions of para (1) of this Article for Parliament to make, in any law relating to public security, provision empowering the president to make emergency regulations in accordance with such law.

(3) It shall not be a contravention of the provisions of para (1) of this Article for Parliament to make any law containing any provision empowering any person or body to make subordinate legislation for prescribed purposes, including the power -

(a) to appoint a date on which any law or any part thereof shall come into effect or cease to have effect;

(b) to make by order any law or any part there of applicable to any locality or to any class of persons; and

(c) to create a legal person, by an order or an Act and for the purposes of sub paras (a) and (b) of this para, "Law" includes existing law.

(4) Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, any existing law containing any such provisionas aforesaid shall be valid and operative.

137(3)(b) The provisions of paras (2), (3) and (4) of Article 92 shall, mutatis mutandis, apply to the exercise of legislative power by Regional Councils.

The proposals do not recognise that there are different nationalities living in Sri Lanka. Let us take the Spanish Constitution (1978) for comparison purposes with regard to nationalities. The Spanish Constitution is not federal but it has devolved powers to its autonomous regions substantially. Article 2 of the Spanish Constitution refers to *'the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, the common and indivisible fatherland of all Spaniards, and recognises and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions'*. Although the term 'nationalities' is not defined in the Spanish Constitution, it has been used to appease the Basque, Catalans and Galician (later) nationalities who wanted their status as historic entities being recognised.

The provision of a Unicameral Parliament in the proposals again effectively shuts the door on a federal structure. The Tamils are apprehensive of the centralising tendency from a single legislature elected by the popular vote giving the reins of power to the ethnic Sinhalese majority. It is noted that an advanced type of devolution requires an Upper Chamber to represent the regions. The countries such as Spain, Italy, South Africa, France etc that have devolved powers have bicameral legislatures. For example, South Africa, a highly devolved political system, has its legislative power vested in a bicameral Parliament, comprising a National Assembly and a National Council of Provinces. Members of the National Council of Provinces are represented on the basis of 10 members (6 permanent delegates and 4 special delegates) from each Province. According to the South African Constitution, the National Council of Provinces represents the Provinces to ensure that Provincial interests are taken into account in the national sphere of government. It does this mainly by participating in the national legislative process and by providing national forum for public consideration of issues affecting the Provinces. There is no institution such as an Upper Chamber in the Sri Lankan proposed Constitution to ensure that regional interests are taken into account.

The proposed Sri Lankan Constitution empowers the President upon being advised by the Prime Minister to assume all or any of the functions of the region by proclamation in circumstances where the regional council is promoting armed rebellion or insurrection or engaging in an intentional violation of certain Articles of the Constitution that constitutes a clear danger to the unity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka. In these circumstances the President has power to dissolve the regional council. The proclamation needs to be forthwith laid before Parliament. The proclamation is conclusive for all purposes and not to be questioned in any court (Article 223). The emergency provisions enable the President to intervene in the spheres of the regional governments and even to dismiss the elected regional governments. These provisions arm the central government against the wishes of the regions and could be used to subvert democracy in the country. These provisions clearly show that the government itself has no faith in devolution guaranteeing a permanent peace. It is worth to note the equivalent provision of the Spanish Constitution. According

to Article 155, the Spanish government will lodge a complaint with the President of an Autonomous Community if the Autonomous Community does not fulfil the obligations imposed by the Constitution or other laws or act in a manner seriously prejudicing the interest of Spain. The government after failing to receive satisfaction from the autonomous community may, following approval granted by an absolute majority of the Senate, adopt the means necessary in order to oblige the latter forcibly to meet said obligations, or in order to protect the above mentioned general interest. The government may also give instructions to all the authorities of the Autonomous regions to implement the above measures. The reader will therefore see that the Spanish Constitution does not contemplate dismissal of a regional government. The South African Constitution too does not.encourage dismissal of a provinial government.

(B) Parliamentary Executive and Power Sharing

The present Sri Lankan Constitution (1978) is a dual executive model consisting of an elected President, and a Prime Minister and cabinet drawn from Parliament. The proposed Constitution moves away from the dual executive system to return to the Parliamentary executive system. The President will be elected by one-half majority of the members of Parliament including those not present. The President will only be a ceremonial head of state, yet he will enjoy certain powers under emergency provisions. Under the parliamentary executive system, the Prime Minister and cabinet exercise executive power.

Sri Lankan people have experienced the parliamentary executive and the dual executive systems of government since independence. It is a pity that these systems have not addressed the grievances of the Tamils. The proposed Sri Lankan Constitution intends to deal with devolution of power rather than power sharing. It does not address power sharing at the Centre, thus putting the Central government at the hands of the majority Sinhalese. The Tamils are undergoing so many hardships because the political systems have not accepted the political equality and the effective political participation of the Tamils in all three branches of the Central government. Political equality does not mean equal numerical representation in all levels but it is whereby the Tamils will be allowed to share power at the Centre effectively and have the right to veto any law or decision of the legislature concerning matters relating to defence, foreign affairs and security where it is prejudicial to their interest.

(C) Boundaries

The North/East provinces are the traditional homeland of the Tamils. The Tamil political parties or the Tamils have not accepted any proposals for re-mapping the boundaries. At present the Provincial Councils are functioning under the thirteenth amendment of the Constitution. Under that amendment the Northern and Eastern provinces are treated as one Provincial Council. The merger of the two provinces is a long-sought aspiration of the Tamil inhabitants. The proposed Constitution has remapped the boundaries of the Eastern province into three segments as follows (First Schedule):

(i) administrative districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa
(ii) polling divisions of Kalmunai, Sammanthurai and Pottuvil
(iii) polling division of Amparai

The successive governments to date have achieved their land grabbing goal by settling the Sinhala people in colonies established in the Tamil Regions. The PA government has now armed itself with the First Schedule to achieve the same goal by shifting boundaries rather than pushing the people around. The boundaries of a region are of historical and sacrosanct nature. Even an exchange of a square mile can complicate the situation.

(D) Fundamental Rights

The proposed Constitution has introduced a new series of fundamental rights provisions, guaranteeing certain basic individual rights. The fact that the great majority of the states in the world guaranteeing the basic individual rights in their constitutions does not mean that such rights really exist and are secured. For example, article 11 of the Sri Lankan Constitution which states, *"No person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment"* has no meaning as it is often breached by the Sri Lankan governments. Sri Lanka is classified as a liberal democracy in Asia among the other countries such as India, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore. Sri Lanka's Human Rights Rating (HRR) is the worst of all the liberal democratic countries in Asia. An HRR of 70% or more is considered to be good. Sri Lanka obtained an HRR of 47% as at 1991 compared to 52% at 1986 (Source: Political Systems of the World 1989 and 1996, J Dennis Derby Shire, Ian Derby Shire).

(E) Non-secular Character

Secularism means non-recognition of any state religions. The short lived 1972 Constitution and the present Constitution (1978) elevated Buddhism to the foremost place and spelled out the State's duty to protect and foster Buddhism as well. The proposed Constitution not only makes provisions for the above but also makes the State to consult the "Supreme Council" recognised by the Minister in charge of the subject of *Buddha Sasana.* These provisions identify Sri Lanka with Buddhism and continue to move further away from the concept of secularism.

Overview

Ethnic nationalism has emerged globally as an important and powerful ideology in recent decades. Today linguistic, racial and religious minorities who suffer at the hands of the numerical majorities are attempting to support for genuine independence. However, because of the lack of support from the international community, they are willing to seek regional autonomy within a federal political system. To defuse national feelings of the ethnic nationalities, some countries have opted to devolve power to their autonomous regions while others have distributed power under a federal system. For example, Spanish devolution has been in place almost for two decades, but it has failed to resolve the separatist tendency. Ethiopia realising the disintegration of its Eriteria in 1992 promulgated a federal constitution in 1994 to unite the other regions. The independence of Eriteria in 1992 might have been avoided had Ethiopia after 1962 accommodated the regional demands under a federal set up. Article 39 Section 1 of the Ethiopian Federal Constitution (1994) says, *"Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right of secession."* Ethiopia by enshrining this Article in the federal constitution has succeeded in bringing the Somalis of the Ogaden region to stay within Ethiopia. It is noted that the Somalis had been agitating for an inde-

pendent state or union with Somalia since 1970s. Belgium similarly after a series of constitutional reforms has finally opted for a federal constitution as recently as 1993 by giving political recognition and status to the different linguistic and cultural communities that exist within the boundaries of Belgium.

The proposed Constitution is masquerading in the garb of devolution, when in truth and, in fact it is a unitary constitution with decentralised features. The proposals do not recognise the injustices of the past. Some countries recently in their preamble recognised the injustices of the past. All the constitutions, including the proposed one have been formulated by the respective government political parties without taking into consideration the aspirations of the Tamils. The Tamils have shown their firm commitment firstly to a federal form of government since 1956 and thereafter, and then exercised their right to national self-determination at the 1977 general election thus completely rejecting a unitary form of government.

As far as Tamils are concerned, the experiment with devolution is dead since the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution has failed to bring peace. It is the government that is making attempts to keep devolution alive. Even the Spanish model which is seen as a superior model to Sri Lankan one has not resolved the Basque problem.

Former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali argued, "the new danger which will appear in the world in the next ten years is more fragmentation. Rather than 100 or 200 countries, you may have at the end of the century 400 countries, and we will not be able to achieve any kind of economic development, not to mention more disputes on boundaries" (The Times, 21 September 1992).

Pakistan and Ethiopia have been broken in virtue of their inability to bend. To avoid disintegration, the Sri Lankan politicians should think of advocating an alternative choice, preferably a system which has elements of consociationalism and federalism. Arend Lijphart has defined consociational democracy in terms of four basic principles: two primary principles (grand coalition and segmental autonomy) and two secondary principles (proportionality and minority veto)*{p277, The Rights of Minority Cultures, edited by Will Kymlicka, 1995}*. The component regions of the federation may be formed on a linguistic rather than on a provincial basis. It will be possible under this system that the Tamil region may devolve powers to Muslims in certain subjects while the Sinhala region does likewise to Plantation Tamils.

It must be remembered that the Tamils are not a minority but they are one and equal nation. ●

SONIA TO RESCUE INDIA FROM HINDUTVA?

T N GOPALAN

In yet another twist of irony, it is the Italian-born Roman Catholic, Sonia Gandhi who is now seen as almost the only person who could be trusted to stop the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in its tracks.

Never mind that the opinion polls tend to discount the influence of bahu Sonia (daughter-in-law of the Nehru clan), the secular parties, even some of the non-Congress variety still hope against hope that this widow of Mr Rajiv Gandhi would be able to swing enough votes against the BJP and thus prevent it from coming to power at the Centre.

The BJP which bagged 193 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha in the 1996 elections seems poised to improve its tally to 250 plus in the mid-term poll scheduled for February-March and thus could be within a striking distance of forming a government either on its own or with the help of its allies.

It is only Sonia who can throw a spanner in its works, though she still remains a politically unknown entity. Nobody knows what is her vote-pulling power, though various theories abound.

But then the Cong-I is crumbing everywhere. Many of its leaders were (until the news of Sonia's decision to campaign for the Congress came) deserting it in panic. The so-called secular forces including the Janata Dal, the regional parties and the left formations are certainly in no position to challenge the BJP in its strongholds, in the Hindi-heartland that is.

Only the Cong-I with all its faults, however discredited it might otherwise be, could do so. And it could successfully mount such a challenge only if some charismatic figure like Sonia is there to lead the forces.

While no one contests the capacity of Sonia to attract crowds anywhere in the country, especially so in the North, no one knows though how many votes she could swing towards the Cong-I in the current political situation.

From May 1991 when her husband was assassinated to August 1995, she had maintained a discreet silence. She had refused to take up the Presidentship of the Cong-I immediately after the assassination and made plain in various ways her distaste for politics. And thus far neither her son Rahul nor her daughter Priyanka has expressed any inclination to join the Cong-I.

When she expressed her anguish over the lackadaisical pace of the Jain Commission and the apparent non-cooperation of the then Narasimha Rao Government, she was giving vent more to her own personal feelings than making any political statement.

But the point is that she made the statement at a rally in Amethi in UP, a constituency carefully nursed by Rajiv Gandhi, and there was an impressive turnout. A few other meetings she addressed in the country including one in Tamil Nadu, inaugurating some project or other, attracted good crowds, clearly indicating that as the bahu of Mrs Gandhi, herself a darling of the masses, Sonia had her own charisma.

Rajiv Gandhi might have led his party to an overwhelming victory in 1984 in the wake of his mother's assassination. But he had lost out to a motley opposition five years later.

An analysis of the 1991 voting figures seem to indicate that had he remained alive he would still have been

unable to steer the Congress back to power even though the National Front disaster had made the people disenchanted with anti-Congressism.

Still he had remained a formidable political figure thanks to the halo of the Nehru clan behind him. And evidently something of it has rubbed off Sonia. Add to it the sympathy factor, one can see why she looks to be popular with the masses, though the real extent of her popularity remains to be seen.

Having seen her mother-in-law, brother-in-law and her own husband die untimely deaths, and two of them assassinated, their private lives under constant scrutiny and financial scandals sullying their images, Sonia would naturally have preferred to retire from public life for good.

But the steady erosion of the Cong-I vote-bank, first under Rao and then under Kesri, should have made her sit up and reconsider her decision not to have anything to do with politics. After all the party so much nurtured by her family was in dire straits and, unless some rescue operation was undertaken, it was sure to disintegrate completely before long.

Not to mention the fact that she could enjoy a lot of privileges and lead a virtually charmed existence thanks to the clout wielded by the Congress in the polity. She would have to ensure that it is not jeopardised.

She perhaps toyed with the idea of backseat driving and hoped some appeals from her to the electorate could pull off the trick. She had attended the Congress plenary session in Calcutta in August last signalling her desire to remain part of the Congress and perhaps also her concern over the crisis in the party.

Still she did not want to come out in the open and preferred back-seat driving as happened in the case of Ms Mamata Banerjee, the enfant terrible of West Bengal. When the latter kicked up a row over the injustice meted out to her and threatened to walk out of the Congress unless she was given her due place in the state Cong-I unit, Sonia quietly tried her hand at fence-mending, summoning Mamata to her residence and trying to talk some sense into her. But Mamata, after some wavering, chose to break away and forge an alliance with the BJP. She might have stayed back if only Sonia had promised to take things in her hands, but the bahu was still not sure.

Meantime middle level leaders including Mr Rangarajan Kumaramangalam, son of that veteran communist-turned-congress leader, Mohan Kumaramangalam, started leaving the Congress and joining the BJP.

In a way the failure of the Kesri leadership to clinch an alliance with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu could be said to have hastened their desertion, though it had been widely rumoured that even during the crisis sparked off by the withdrawal of the Cong-I's support to the Gujral Government, as many as 40 MP's had expressed their willingness to join the BJP in order to avoid a mid-term poll.

In any case those like Mr Mani Shankara Aiyer, a former aide of Rajiv and who sought to bask in his legacy, would not have dreamt of leaving the Congress but for Jayalalitha's surprising decision to ditch the Cong-I and join hands with the BJP.

And they were all leaving because there was no one around in the leadership who could be expected to attract the masses. Kesri or Arun Singh are hardly the kind of leaders who could change the fortunes of a party declining at an alarming pace. Even at the time of finally withdrawing his support to Gujral, thus forcing elections on the nation, Kesri had appealed to Sonia to take over the leadership. After all he had embarked on such a brinkmanship only in the name of her husband. Still citing security reasons Sonia had opted out at the last moment from a programme in the Congress Bhavan in New Delhi.

How such a person is going to brave the arduous campaigning through the length and breadth of such a vast nation like India and how could she desist from mingling with the masses if she wants to win their confidence and persuade them to vote for the Congress are still moot points.

Though the Left is not exactly excited about her taking to politics, in private they confide that she is the best bet to defeat the BJP in such states like the UP, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In the UP especially which sends the largest contingent of 85 members to the Lok Sabha where the Cong-I is almost moribund and the two secular leaders Kanshi Ram and Mulayam Singh Yadav are flying at each other's throat all the time, only Sonia could be expected to reverse the onward march of the Sangh Parivaar (as the BJP and its communal front organisations are called).

The fact remains though right now the BJP has the upper hand. Its prime ministerial candidate, the suave Atal Behari Vajpayee is seen as a moderating influence on a trident-wielding obscurantist crowd, eminently fit to lead the nation at a critical juncture. The BJP is perceived as a disciplined party with a relatively clean image by the middle classes, tired of the united front circus and who are willing to turn a blind eye to its fascist inclinations. That by inducing the criminal elements in the UP into its fold in order to save its government, by joining hands with someone like the notoriously corrupt Jayalalitha, and by openly declaring that it would align itself with anyone who can assure it of a couple of seats, the BJP has lost its USP (unique selling proposition in commercial parlance), does not seem to bother the urban voters who would like stability at any cost.

"What if they are communal? Let them talk of Hindutva to their heart's content. We don't care so long as they do not go on a rampage against the Muslims or create some other serious law and order problems. After all in the states where they are in power, you don't see any great danger to the minorities ... and stability is the need of the hour if our economy is to do well," a leading industrialist was quoted as saying.

Such men are willing to ignore the long-term implications of the BJP's hard-line stand on issues like Kashmir or the Uniform Civil Code. Or even the transformation the popular discourse could undergo making the Muslims and Dalits feel increasingly uneasy as is happening in Maharashtra where that mad Thackeray's goons are ruling the roost in almost every walk of life.

The only solace of course is that not always the narrow-minded middle classes or the greedy rich succeed in imposing their views on the rest of the country. ●

BJP IN INDIAN ELECTIONS: EVIL TURNS INNOCENT IN POLITICS

Ramesh Gopalakrishnan

It is easy to coalesce the categories intelligentsia and intellectuals; well, the two are not the same. While the modern intelligentsia is at best an articulate representative of a given political class or group jostling for power, the intellectual is someone with the least bit of self-doubt. The confusion between the two categories has resulted in the decimation of thought in Tamil Nadu. And the latest instance is the political situation in which sections of the Tamil intelligentsia are thoroughly confused over the sudden decision of Dravidian parties to vie with each other to align with the ever-blooming now-winning BJP lotus. And the intellectual is yet to be born - a new species almost !

This is the first time that the Bharatiya Janata Party has been getting Dravidian parties, which are generally sworn proponents of secularism, as allies. The intelligentsia, to its credit, foresaw the possibility of AIADMK leader J Jayalalitha clinching the alliance deal with the BJP. After all, the alliance only representated the ideological convergence between the Brahmin in Jayalalitha and the Manuvadi BJP. Yes, they correctly said, Jayalalitha was the lone chief minister to have supported the Sangh Parivar's kar seva at Ayodhya resulting in the horrific demolition of the Babri Masjid exactly five Decembers ago.

The shock was yet to come. The Marumalarchi DMK of V Gopalsamy and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) of Dr S Ramadoss, which have sizeable presence in pockets of Tamil Nadu, then decided to go along with the AIADMK-BJP front. Well, the Gopalsamy, who quit the DMK four years ago to work for the "malarchi" of the Dravidian movement, was now defending the "malarchi" of the BJP lotus; and worse, Dr Ramadoss, the champion of the depressed castes in northern Tamil Nadu, made up with the Manuvadis who are now under the wings of Jayalalitha who once wanted to ban the PMK!

Well, the more shocking news to the intelligentsia is that the ruling DMK is not happy with the AIADMK-BJP alliance. It has been saddened by the above turn of events! Yes, chief minister M Karunanidhi and DMK ideologue Murasoli Maran wanted to keep their options open to form a "linkage" with the BJP in case the BJP-led front secured a majority in the February elections. Now, alas, such a possibility has been ruled out in the wake of the entry of Jayalalitha and other rivals of the DMK into the BJP-led front. The last of the BJP's allies in Tamil Nadu is Vazhapadi K Ramamurthy, who came to politics as a disciple of Periyar E V Ramasamy and a sworn Congressman for 35 years. Ramamurthy feebly protests that his alliance is only with the AIADMK ! The most interesting fact is that some even Dalit groups have aligned with the Manuvadi AIADMK-BJP front.

Of course, the Most well-known entrant to the BJP in Tamil Nadu is Rangarajan Kumaramangalam, whose grandfather Subbaroyan was a member of the Justice Party and later the Congress. Subbaroyan's was one of the first intercaste reform marriages in Modern Tamil Nadu, the other being that of V R Nedunchezhian (who incidentally is with the AIADMK defending the alliance with the BJP)! Subbaroyan's son Mohan Kumaramangalam went a step further by joining the Communists and marrying a Bengali comrade, Kalyani. Mohan joined the Congress in the late 60s as part of The CPI's infiltration tactics, but went on to become Mrs Indira Gandhi's trusted loyalists till his untimely demise in a 1974 aircrash. Rangarajan remained left-of-centre till last month. And his two Communist aunts, both in their seventies, watched in horror as he quietly moved over to the BJP coolly forgetting his own protestations against the demolition of the Babri Masjid !

The Tamil intelligentsia is racking its brains: what the hell is goin' on ?! What's the rationale for Dravidian, Dalit or leftist leaders to align with the BJP, which is a well-known party of industrialists, traders and urban middle classes mainly concentrated in the north and west of India ? Is it sheer lust for power ? Or, is it a betrayal of their own ideology for short-term electoral gains ? After all, they'd seen the scene of George Fernandes, the veteran socialist, moving over to the BJP-led front three years ago ! And how to manage the interests of Tamil Nadu's capitalists once the BJP is firmly in saddle at the centre ?

It would be easy to dub this decision of these leaders s electoral opportunism and go for one more round of extreme rhetoric castigating these parties as betrayers. Is that all ? May be, why not, a deeper process is on.

The intelligentsia, perhaps, is running out of ideas, categories and expressions invented and legitimised for another era. With the implosion of identity politics in the Indian public sphere, the earlier era of across-the-board mobilisation is over. The public sphere is being redefined in terms of new Others, attitudes, ranging from extreme categories of enmity to resentment against domination. Perhaps, this violent categorisation is common throughout south Asia these days, leading to protracted battles in social theatres. Caught as the representative of either one or the other groups, the intelligentsia remains clueless about events which it feels it must interpret.

Violence of thought is the order of the day. A human being is just his caste or community, redefined as the Other. Mobilisation among the lines of identity and kinship breed resistance from groups of privilege, resulting in a circle of resentment and spiritual or ethical death. The intelligentsia gives up its soul and sense of balance. The good and the evil are blurred. The land is no longer the habitats of people but something which divides them eternally. Well, does this all sound too familiar for Lankan expatriates ?!

The intelligentsia has easy questions which it will soon pose to itself: well, didn't Marxism have its final failure as a world faith a decade ago ? Is not political nationalism, an extreme form of it, fashionable as an ideology or way of mobilisation ? Is not identity based on kinship a nice basis to mobilise and thwart the hegemony of caste which itself is based on kinship and lifestyle structures ? The answers are difficult to find, but are to be necessarily

discovered or invented to avoid the violence of a circular pattern of thought which begins and ends up slamming a person as his community or caste. Isn't the person something more than just that ? Something in excess ? A being in excess of definitions ? A possibility of excess of consciousness, of ethics and culture ? Perhaps, these are the right questions one will have to ask ! From such answers will flow the need for an intellectual, a person of culture and ethics, a new consciousness who will be born out of the intelligentsia but would be far different from it. Well, that may happen in future and certainly not now.

The recent history of Tamil Nadu, alas, has followed the exact opposite course. A decade ago, Marxism failed as a world religion and scores of Marxists mentally left their ideology and moved over to pastures of identity politics. The Dravidian movement being a forerunner in the ways of identity politics attracted them and was born an amalgam of a Dravidianised-Marxism or Marxicised-Dravidianism, made suitable for home conditions. Alas, not only was the Dravidian parties enjoying political power, their arch-rival and enemy, the BJP was using all the means possible to grab hegemony in the Indian public sphere including the horrifying act of demolishing the Babri Masjid. This was the accident of history, that single event, which represented north India for the entire south and beyond.

For the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, the Masjid was articulated as the symbol of the colonising Other, the Mughal Babar, and the demolisher was none-other-than-the-poor-Hindu-subaltern-villager. Such a perfidy of theory was enacted as history, as media history, freezing the mindset of anyone down south. The image, of the demolition, ultimately has now paid off in distant south, even as the intentions and consequences of the real act started getting wiped out from the public sphere and its poor memory. Well, the BJP, for all pragmatic purposes of the media-crazy lot, is the only real "actor" in history !

Hence, in their media-craziness, in their obsessive liking for the public sphere, the BJP and their exact ideological opponents, the hithereto-Dravidians or hitherto-leftists, have come face to face, even together. Hatred, repulsion, obsession, lust, desire, love, harmony, co-habitation, sex, jealousy, dissonance, discord, disharmony, separation, violence and hatred. This narrative circle is at least half-complete now ! If anything beyond electoral survival can be offered as the reason for their current cosy relationship, it is this craziness for the public sphere, its codes Of sensation, repetition, simultaneity, non-differentiation Of qualities, loudness and trivialisation. In that sense, the modern media go a little beyond German fascism which relied upon sensation alone. The modern media are uni-dimensional (the screen "talks" to you, silencing you and keeping alive that part of you which can "talk back" to the screen). The glibness of non-differentiation, obviously, promotes cultureless stereotypes, of Muslims and Brahmins in the case of BJP's Hindutva, of Yadavs and Dalits in the case of anti-BJP parties in the north and so on.

Sensationalism and repetition are opposite but necessary features of the media. Both nullify all attempts at evaluation which are based on continuity of culture and some form of ethics. However, evaluation does not count any longer in the task of establishment of hegemony in the public sphere. There is no need to evaluate ! The BJP leaders lie and seek to convince by their lies. They meet their enemies and turn them into friends. Sheer evil magic ! The media invents the goodness of the BJP, which the latter shall seek to prove and demonstrate with the aid and assistance of its new-found allies like the Dravidian parties. For the BJP, the evil in the public sphere has metamorphosed into innocence and its allies sit ethicless and cultureless under the shade of this evil-turned-innocence to possibly attain a new enlightenment in political horror.●

AIADMK-BJP ALLIANCE STILL ON A STICKY WICKET

T N GOPALAN

Jayalalitha has struck up an alliance with the BJP, something unthinkable for a Dravidian leader, roped in the likes of Dr Ramadas of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). V Gopalasamy of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and Vazhapadi K Ramamurthy now heading a splinter Congress group called Thamizhaka Rajiv Congress into the front led by her and finally conducted a "massive" state convention at Tirunelveli.

Even by the opportunistic standards of the modern day politics, the disparate combination is a unique phenomenon. From the perennially peripatetic Subramaniam Swamy to the tirelessly fire-spouting Dr Ramadas, with a Hindutva champion sharing the dais uncomfortably with a Dravidian party, the front is sure to provide some interesting spectacle in the days to come. And the way the AIADMK supremo Jayalalitha whips them into positions she wants, like a ringmaster, will be the stuff the gossip columnists are drooling after.

But their antics apart, what is of immediate concern is the toe-hold the BJP, until recently considered the Brahmin-Bania party of the Hindi-speaking northerners who are suppressing the south, has gained in the state.

It has at long last become acceptable, respectable. At the Silver Jubilee Convention of the AIADMK at Tirunelveli, BJP President L K Advani was given the pride of place, and speaker after speaker including Ramadas and Gopalasamy, went out of their way to issue a good conduct certificate to the BJP, saying that there was no need to suspect its "secular" credentials, though for the records they warned that they would be forced to revolt if a future BJP government did anything that went against the interests of the minorities.

And this prompted Advani to come out with a categorical declaration that his party stood committed to "genuine secularism" as conceived in the constitution and went on to note that there was nothing unnatural about the AIADMK-BJP alliance, the tie-up between a regional Dravidian Party and a (Hindutva) Nationalist Party.

It was but a natural evolution, the next logical step for the ADMK which had turned into the AIADMK, acquiring a nationalist perspective even in its initial years. One should remember that Jaya had declared on the floor of the house when she was the Chief Minis-

ter, "I represent the latest stage in the evolution of the Dravidian movement."

But she has never made any secret of her devout nature and beliefs in a variety of Hindu religious practices. Her mentor MGR also used to frequent temples and one of his ministers, significantly a Jaya-supporter, used to expound on scriptures in temples. Still the AIADMK at the time was a bit too shy of flaunting its religious inclinations.

But with Jaya there was no need for any such hypocrisy. Yajnas were performed on her behalf, her high-profile visit to Kumbakonam in 1992 to participate in the Mahamakham Festival in the company of Sasikala - when a stampede caused the death of scores of devotees -the kumkum on her forehead, her tacit encouragement of practices like rolling on the ground within temple premises or eating rice served on the mud floor on her birthdays, all went to show that she was moulding the party after her own image.

On a particularly grisly occasion, a man pretended to be dead, his body was carried through the streets ceremonially and his funeral rites were performed to invoke God's blessings for his leader. The activist was rewarded with a ticket for the Assembly elections in 1996. That God was not particularly kind, as the results showed later, either to the man or his boss is a different story altogether.

In 1991 she had first appealed to the Hindu Munnani to desist from taking out rallies on the Ganesh Chathurthi (the birthday of Lord Vinayaka) and to the Muslim outfits not to organise the Miladunnabi Rally - the two followed in close succession, generated a lot of tension and led to unnecessary violence. The Muslims obliged, but the Hindus would not. Still Jaya allowed the Munnani to take out the rally, attracting a lot of flak. She finally clamped down on them two years later when they indulged in wanton violence.

Anyway in 1992, when speaking at the National Integration Council she had wanted the Kar Seva (by the Sangh Parviaar at Ayodhya) to go on and stressed the need to respect the majority sentiments.

She had brushed aside the apprehensions of antagonising the Muslims as baseless and when she won an Assembly by-election the next year in a constituency dominated by the Muslims, she seemed to feel vindicated. She had won contesting alone, without the support of the Congress.

Whatever she did or did not do, whoever she was with, she was invincible, she should have felt. From then on she started treating the Congress with disdain which finally led to the birth of the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) and her own debacle thereafter.

But the fault-line in her thinking was and still is that she did not realise that while the Muslims voters might not count for much in the state, every vote should matter when the general population had turned against her. There is no significant change in the popular mood since.

It is still not very clear why she decided to ditch her long-time ally the Cong-I, despite pathetic pleas from Kesri's men, In fact an opinion poll conducted by a reputed agency did show that an AIADMK-Cong-I alliance could change Jaya's fortunes for the better, the alliance could bag up to 12 seats, it had predicted. There is still a lot of goodwill for Sonia Gandhi in the state.

Apparently she calculated that anyway Congress was a dying party and the BJP was likely to come to power and its goodwill could help her get off her back the myriad court cases against her. Possibly even she could get them to dismiss the DMK government and go in for fresh elections.

But she never took into account the Sonia factor. In fact she is said to have pressed the Congress team which called on her to give an undertaking that they would persuade Sonia to campaign in which case she would be agreeable for an alliance. But the Congress could do no such thing and the talks broke down. The rump Congress in the state is now at its wit's end, not knowing which way to go. But what is of immediate concern is Jaya's own fate and not that of the Congress which is anyway finished in the state - only Moopanar can infuse some life into it and such a turn of events is unlikely in the near future.

Indications are that the AIADMK-led Front is unlikely to make much of an impact in spite of all the brouhaha raised in the media. The BJP has virtually no following in the state, and it is only pinning its hopes on its image as a national party with a chance to form the government.

Jaya herself is not exactly on the come-back trail, not recovered from the barrage of scandals which have been buffeting her around relentlessly. The lukewarm response the Tirunelveli rally went to show that she still had to make up a lot of distance before catching up with the DMK-TMC combine.

Gopalasamy's MDMK is still a non-starter for all the fire and fury he tries to evoke through his declamations. At best he could hope to win a couple of seats. The PMK with a solid Vanniar following is the one party which could be expected to bring in the highest number of votes to the Front's kitty, but then its influence is confined to a few seats in the northern and northwestern regions.

Others in the alliance like Subramanaim Swamy or Vazhapadi Ramamurthy do not count for anything, and they could survive only courtesy of the other partners. Still surrounded by the militant Thevars, Jayalalitha has still not been able to win back the confidence of the Dalits. And whatever Muslim votes the AIADMK used to command traditionally have also been lost thanks to the alliance with the BJP. On the other hand the DMK-TMC alliance is sitting pretty, though Moopanar did show some signs of wavering after the Gujral Government fell. And the announcement of Sonia's entry complicated the picture further. But finally things should settle down.

Anyway the DMK regime has not done that badly as to trigger any wave against it. And so this alliance should be able to walk away an overwhelming majority of the 40 seats at stake. Even the most optimistic supporter of Jayalalitha would not grant her more than ten to twelve seats in the current situation.

But she has done enough damage already. Traditionally the Muslims have been strong allies of the Dravidian movement Muslim League Leader Qaid-e-Millath Mohammed Ismail was a close friend of Periyar EVR and C N Annadurai. This harmony between the non-Brahmin Tamils and the Muslims has now been broken for good.

The riots in Coimbatore in November - sparked off though by the excesses of a fringe Muslim group - in which 20 Muslims perished and Muslim shops were looted and burnt the policemen playing a major role in the outrage and the explosions in three trains on 6 December, on the fifth anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition, were a grim pointer to the shape of things to come.

It is in this context the alliance with

(Continued on next page)

COMMUNALISATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE IN TAMIL NADU

Ramesh Gopalakrishnan

The communal nightmare has dawned on Tamils. The textile city of Coimbatore never had it so bad in recent times. This second biggest city of Tamil Nadu went up in flames earlier this month, with the police egging on a hardcore bunch of Hindu communal elements who unleashed a reign of terror in Muslim pockets mainly as a retaliation for the murder of a traffic constable by Muslim fundamentalists the previous night. At least 20 people perished in police firing, violence and arson which continued unabated for the next three days, culminating in a bomb blast at nearby Udumalpet killing three women passers-by.

News correspondents, bureaucrats, police bosses, political parties and ideologues were stunned to learn that the communalists waited at the government medical college hospital at Coimbatore and targetted the injured persons brought there for treatment. The angry policemen simply appreciated the communalists who coolly lynched four persons, burning one of them with petrol siphoned off from a motorcycle. Such was the cold ferocity of the carnage. Some of the policemen, it has been reported, simply changed into mufti and participated in the violence and looting, even as their wives led a demonstration demanding security for their husbands at work.

In many ways, Coimbatore represented the version of ideal modernity for the Tamils. It had textile, mechanical and agro-based industries, three engineering colleges, a medical college, an agricultural varsity and some top class arts collges, hardworking bunches of entrepreneurs, planters and middle peasants, trade unions with strong bases, and finally, political and literary ideologues who relentlessly pursue a version of Dravidianised Marxism totally inimical to communalism of any sort. Now, all this is at stake, with the communalisation of public sphere.

For several years now, none of the mainstream parties have been able to do anything about the growth of various fundamentalist organisations in Tamil Nadu. They have no clue as to how to counter the communalist propaganda. The Hindu Munnani has gone on a brazen hate campaign, with its leader Rama Gopalan addressing meetings all over Tamil Nadu. The Munnani is seen as the field arm of the Sangh Parivar in the state. The Sangh Parivar has also been mobilising village temple priests under the banner of the Viswa Hindu Parishad which was among the organisations responsible for the despicable demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has a bunch of keen highly-placed admirers in the city of Chennai who organise public meetings under the banner of a front organisation called Vigil, a public forum. So, the RSS

keeps itself out of the tough-talking and dirty-acting, free to mobilise the influential lot. The BJP has cultivated a lot of friends in the media, and the friends are keen to oblige it by invoking the TINA (There Is No Alternative) factor in favour of the BJP in the next elections.

Tamil Nadu has witnessed several communal murders in the last decade: among those killed are scores of Hindu Munnani activists including its president Rajagopalan at Madurai and Hindu Sangam president Kannuthal. The RSS and Hindu Munnani headquarters in the heart of Chennai city were blasted four years ago. The BJP too has been losing some of its cadre in Tamil Nadu.Last week, one of its district vice-presidents was killed at Uttamapalayam in Madurai. These fundamentalist organisations have grown faster in the last decade in Tamil Nadu, with some BJP leaders revealing that the majority of the bricks for the brick-laying ceremony (a newspeak word for the demolition act) at Ayodhya came from Tamil Nadu. AIADMK general secretary J Jayalalitha had openly supported the BJP's "kar seva" charade which preceded the demolition. And Arun Shourie, the Express columnist, addressed his first public meeting at Chennai tacitly supporting the demolition drive.

The Muslim fundamentalist organisations have also lost a number of their members, including Palani Baba, an acid-tongued speaker who went on to found the militant Jehad Committee. Palani Baba was murdered at Pollachi last year. And the Jehad Committee is now led by the militant Kunangudi R M Haniffa, none other than the grandson of the soft-spoken Sufi poet-mystic Kunangudi Mastan Saheb! The Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK) was founded by Maulvi Zainul Abideen after some Muslim youth were arrested under the dreaded TADA act after the RSS and Hindu Munnani headquarters' blasts. Another fundamentalist organisation, Al Umma was formed a few years ago at Coimbatore by one S A Pasha after his release from detention. All these organisations are full of militant youths who are demanding punishment of those responsible for the demolition, reconstruction of the Babri Masjid and proportional representation in government jobs and educational institutions. While they proclaim from roof-tops that they believe in democracy, they seem not averse to using violent methods to fulfil their ends. There appears to be tremendous ferment among the Muslim youth of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Their participation in these outfits have almost marginalised traditional Muslim-based parties like the Indian Union Muslim League and the Indian National League.

Chief minister M Karunanidhi, after assuming office, tried to clear his promise of release of the TADA detenus under bail. Even this measure is caught in judicial wrangles and the Muslim militant outfits are angry with him. He also has to face up to the Sangh Parivar allegation that his government has been releasing "terrorists". These outfits,

(Continued from page 27)

the BJP could have serious long-term implications for the polity. And Advani said as much when he claimed short-term electoral gains were secondary and he was looking for a fusion of northern and southern perspectives, he was of course meaning imposition of the Hindutva on the South. One can only wish that he does not succeed in his designs, at least in Tamil Nadu. ●

which have poured scorn on Jayalalitha for reportedly sending some of her supporters to help the demolition act. The TMMK defied police ban on December 6 in the city this year and more than 5,000 of its cadre courted arrest. In the meantime, unidentified persons detonated bombs in three major trains which had left Chennai city the previous night. At least 10 passengers were killed in the blasts which took place in trains near Tiruchirapalli and Erode in Tamil Nadu and at Thrissur in Kerala. The blasts, it seemed, were intended to go off in a serial manner to create panic and insecurity. They served their purpose and rumour mills worked overtime to strike terror in the hearts of the Tamil populace.

With the BJP backing the Hindu Munnani with all its might, the DMK regime seems to be in a quandary. The DMK is definitely moving closer to the BJP after its rebuff by the Congress(I) on the Jain Commission interim report issue. Ideologically, the DMK and the BJP are polls apart; at least seemingly so, but the BJP has taken pains to defend the DMK of late. Though Karunanidhi asserts from time to time that DMK cannot support a BJP-led government at the centre, the BJP seems keen to woo the DMK at least after the general elections. After all, the BJP and its allies are inching towards forming a government at the centre after the elections. All this has angered the Muslim youth no end, as they had solidly backed the DMK-TMC alliance in the last elections. On the other hand, Hindu Munnani leader Rama Gopalan has easy access to Jayalalitha and is out to criticise the DMK regime on every possible occasion.

Returning to the Coimbatore violence issue, it must be stated here that the Muslim pocket in the city at Ukkadam and Kottai Medu is almost a ghetto. The Sangh Parivar has long been alleging that the Muslim fundamentalists have been using the "safe houses" "ghetto" as a launching pad for their violent activities. The BJP even alleges that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence is behind some of the groups, supplying them with the deadly RDX explosive via Kerala. The BJP has certainly driven home its point after the three train blasts, reducing the already-shrinking anti-communal space in the public sphere of Tamil Nadu. Times, indeed, are dangerous for Tamil Nadu. ●

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OFFICE IN JAFFNA

A regional office of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka was opened in Jaffna on 8 January 1998. Besides the Jaffna Regional office, the Commission has now established Regional Offices in Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Kalmunai, Amparai, Vavuniya, Anuradhapura, Kandy, Matara and Badulla.

The Jaffna Regional Office was declared open by Mr.T Suntheralingam, Member of the HRC at a ceremony which was also attended by Mr Javid Yusuf also a member of the HRC, the Additional Govt. Agent of Jaffna Mr.Thuraiappah Vaithilingam, other govt officers, senior members of the armed forces and representatives of NGOs working in Jaffna.

Mr.Sutheralingam addressing the people who gathered for the opening ceremony said that human rights do not mean only men's rights, and included more importantly children's and women's rights. He pointed out the importance of the members of the armed forces to work in a manner that they do not commit any violations.

Outlining the role of the Commission, Javid Yusuf said that the Commission was conceived of as an independent and impartial body to monitor and implement the protection and promotion of human rights. In exercising the function of monitoring the welfare of detainees, the Commission had the power to visit any place of detention without prior notice. The Commission had a very wide mandate ranging from inquring into complaints relating to infringment of fundamental and promoting awareness among the people concerning human rights.

Mr.S Pathmanathan, President of the Council of NGOs in Jaffna said that the opening of the HRCSL office in Jaffna was a significant step forward, and assured the co-operation of the NGOs of Jaffna in the work of the Commission.

Award For Prof.Eliezer

Professor Christie Jeyam Eliezer has been awarded the title of **"Maamanithar"** (Distinguished Person) by the leader of the LTTE Velupillai Pirabakaran "in recognition of your patriotic service to the cause of national freedom."

Eliezer, who is resident in Australia is the chairperson of Federation of Tamil Associations in Australia, is the first person living outside Tamil Eelam to have been awarded with such a title by the LTTE leader.

In his letter dateed 19 October 1997 addressed to Prof. Eliezer, Mr. Pirabakaran stated, "I have great pleasure in conveying to you , on behalf of our liberation movement and of the Tamil nation my sincere appreciation and grateful thanks for the tremendous services you have rendered over the years for the furtherance of our national liberation struggle. We also salute you for your unique and illustrial achievements in the academic sphere which has done our nation proud.

"Dispite being a long resident in Australia, you have always been conscious of the fact that you are a son of Tamil Eelam and have displayed a rare degree of patriotism and a sense of belonging to the Tamil nation, which ahve motivated you to render invaluable service to the cause of national liberation and freedom of our people. Having recognised the reasonableness of our cause, you have given expression to the aspirations of our people and justified our struggle for self determination. You have been a relentless campaigner for justice to the Tamil nation and have been making innumerable representations to the highest levels of Australian Government.

"You have been relentless in your pursuit of the right to self determination for the people of Tamil Eelam so as to ensure that they live with freedom and dignity. You have been campaigning with utmost courage and convication for the attainment of this noble objective. We salute you as a great man and a noble patriot.

"According due recognition and honour to great men of service is part of Tamil culture. In keeping with this rich tradition, I have immense pleasure and pride in conferring on you the title of "MAAMANITHAR", the highest national honour of Tamil Eelam, in recognition of your patriotic service to the cause of national freedom."

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MATRIMONIAL

Jaffna Hindu parents *of good social standing seek professionally qualified partner for their son, 29, 6', British citizen with British University degree and Accountancy qualifications, presently working overseas. Apply in confidence with full details and horoscope. M 1002 c/o Tamil Times.*

Aunt *seeks suitable partner for niece, single lady doctor in UK from a Jaffna Tamil Christian family, a batchelor professionally qualified, 40-43 years. Christians and Catholics will be accepted. Please give all details in correspondence. M 1003 c/o Tamil Times.*

Jaffna Hindu parents *seek professionally qualified partner for pretty daughter, 29, 5'3", with a university degree. Send details to Dr. Subramaniam, 680 Serra Street, Suite #W202, Stanford, CA 94305, USA. Tel: (650) 497 9373 in USA.*

Jaffna Hindu parents *living in Colombo seek bride below 30 for son 34, French citizen, and for daughter 25, living in Colombo, groom over 28. Send horoscope, details. M 1004 c/o Tamil Times.*

Mother *seeks professionally qualified attractive bride for British born Chartered Accountant son, 31. Send photo, details. M 1005 c/o Tamil Times.*

Jaffna Hindu parents *seek professionally qualified partner for computer engineer son, UK permanent resident, working in London, 28, 5'6". Send horoscope, details. M 1006 c/o Tamil Times.*

OBITUARIES

Mrs. Nithiyaratnam Nadaraja, *beloved wife of late N. Nadaraja (Former Asst. Controller of Establishments, Treasury) of 38, Dr. E.A. Cooray Mawatta, Wellawatte, Sri Lanka passed away in USA on 11th November 1997. She is survived by her children Nageswary Sivapragasam (Dr. S. Sivapragasam) USA, Dr. Nagendra Nadaraja (Dr. Ira Nadaraja) USA, Rajendra Nadaraja (Vasantha) UK, Dr. Raveedra Nadaraja (Dr. Gowri Nadaraja) USA and grandchildren Dr. Sudarshan Sivapragasam, Niranjan Sivapragasam, Chitranjali Sivapragasam, Nishan Nadaraja, Avvai Rajendra, Enga Rajendra, Eeson Rajendra, Garani Shiranthana Nadaraja, Divani Raveena Nadaraja. Funeral took place on Saturday, 15th November 1997.*

The members of her family wish to express their sincere thanks to all friends and relations who attended the funeral and sent messages of sympathy and floral tributes. – 15 Howe Road, Hampton, Virginia 23669, USA. Tel: 757 851 3664.

Mrs. Maheswary Thiagarajah, *of Karainagar, beloved wife of late Dr. Arumugam Thiagarajah, former Principal, Karainagar Hindu College and former MP for Vaddukoddai; beloved mother of Thiagavathy, Punithavathy, Mangayatkarasi, Gnanasampanthan and Venugopal; mother-in-law of Rasiah, Selvaratnam, Sabaratnam, Mohanadevi and Nimalini and grandmother of Yasotha, Bharathan, Shiamala, Ragavan, Meera, Radha, Abiramy and Sangaran expired 29th December 1997 at Colombo. Cremation took place on 31st December 1997 at Colombo. Tel: 0181 205 3839 (UK).*

Dr. Parimalasothi Doraisamy (nee Kandasamy)

19.1.1933 – 16.12.1997.

Beloved wife of Dr. Anandan Doraisamy of Prasanthi Nilayam, loving mother of Dayalan (Wimbledon); loving mother-in-law of Jayanthi; doting grandmother of Sathya, Haran; beloved sister of Pathmasothi Amirthanandan (Welwyn Garden City), late Kamalasothi Alagesan, Sothisrihari (Harlow); sister-in-law of D. Amirthanandan, D. Vivekanandan (Thondamannar), Ratna Sundaralingam (Chennai), late V. Alagesan and Balasaraswathy Sothisrihari, passed away after a brief illness. Her funeral and cremation took place in Chennai on 17th December 1997 and her ashes were sprinkled in the Chitravati River in Puttaparthi on 24th December 1997.

Parimalasothi ('Chutta' to her family and intimate friends) will be greatly missed by her close family and vast number of friends and her former patients.

Her family wish to thank all friends and relatives who attended her funeral and for all the help rendered during this time of great grief and to all those who sent messages of sympathy. – 'Rangapuri', 374 Longbanks, Harlow, Essex CM18 7PG. Tel: 01279 413303.

Santhiapillai Tiburtius

Born: 11.08.33.
Died: 02.12.97.

Mr S. Tiburtius, *an old boy of St. Patricks College, Jaffna, chose teaching as his career on graduating from the University of Ceylon with a Science Degree in 1956. He was on the staff of Union College, Tellippalai and American Mission College, Udupiddy before doing the Post Graduate Diploma in Education in 1962. He then served at Vada Hindu Girls College, Point Pedro; Vaideeswara College, Jaffna; Methodist Girls High School, Point Pedro and Puloly Boys English School (Velautham Maha Vidyalayam), Point Pedro. He left for Lesotho in 1978 and having served there for a few months, moved to Nigeria. He taught at Baptist High School, Shaki; African Church Grammar School and Mount Olivet Grammar School, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. He retired in 1993 and resided in the UK, before going to his home town, Point Pedro where he died after a brief illness.*

He leaves behind his grieving wife Gunam, daughter Thamayanthi, sons Thayalan, and Akilan, son-in-law Praveen Kumar Roy and grandson Neel Prasad.

The members of his family wish to thank all those who sent messages of condolence and shared in their grief. – Upper Newick Doctors' Residence, Runwell Hospital, Wickford, Essex.

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31st Day Remembrance of Mrs. Dilani Royce

Entered earthly life : 22.05.1969
Called to rest : 18.12.1997

We did not see you close your eyes,
We did not see you die,
All that we knew was that you were gone,
Without a last goodbye.

It was a sudden parting,
Too bitter to forget,
All those who loved you,
Are the ones who will never forget.

The happy hours we once enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still,
But death has left a vacant place,
This world can never fill.

Your life was one of a kindly deed,
A helping hand for others' needs,
Sincere and true in heart and mind
Beautiful memory left behind.

Fondly remembered and missed by your ever loving husband, parents, sisters and family.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

February 2 *Sashdi; Feast of Presentation of Our Lord Jesus.*

Feb. 4 *Karthikai.*

Feb. 5 *Feast of St. Agatha.*

Feb. 7 *Ekathasi.*

Feb. 8 *Pirathosam.*

Feb. 10 *Thai Poosam.*

Feb. 11 *Full Moon; Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes.*

Feb. 14 *SLTWG Drop in. Tel: 0181 545 3313.*

Feb 14 *6.00pm Vembadi Old Girls' Association (UK) Annual General Meeting at St. Nicholas Church Hall, Church Lane, Tooting, London SW17. For details Tel: 0181 248 6622.*

Feb. 15 *Sankadahara Chathurthi; 3.00pm Holy Mass of the Feast of Sri Lanka organised by the Association of Sri Lankan Catholics at St. Sebastian & St Pancras Catholic Church Hay Lane. Kingsbury, London NW9. All welcome. For details Tel: 0181 422 6126.*

Feb. 21 *SLTWG Women's Front meeting. Tel: 0181 545 3313.*

Feb. 22 *Ekathasi; Feast of St. Polycarp.*

Feb. 24 *Pirathosam.*

Feb. 25 *Maha Sivarathiri; Ash Wednesday.*

Feb. 26 *Amavasai.*

Feb. 28 *SLTWG Drop in. Tel: 0181 545 3313.*

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IN MEMORIAM

Tenth Death Anniversary

Dr. P. Pushpanathan, *who was a private practitioner at Balangoda and Navatkuli attained eternity on 27.1.1988.*

He is fondly remembered by his wife Puvaneswary, daughter Krishnie Vanaja, son Balendra, son-in-law Keerthikumar, grandchildren Hindusha, Krishanthe, Sanjuram and niece Geetha Kaneshanathan. – 73 Somervell Road, South Harrow, Middx. HA2 8TZ, UK. Tel: 0181 248 0325.

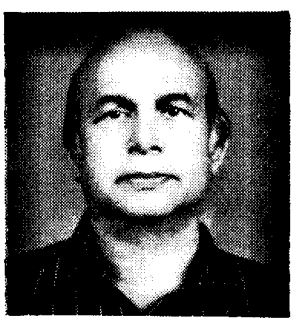
In loving memory of **Mrs. Ganeswary Tharmalingam** *of Kondavil East on the Fifth Anniversary of her passing away on 21.1.93.*

Sadly missed and fondly remembered by her loving husband Tharmalingam; children Brabalini, Bremjit and Ranjit; son-in-law Dr. W.N. Linganandhan; daughters-in-law Dr. Vani Bremjit and Shamini Ranjit; grandchildren Abirami, Sathya, Praneela, Praseetha Prashoban Praveen and Anjana. – 32 Anvil Way, North Springfield, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 5SZ. Tel: 01245 466363.

In loving memory of Mrs. Sivagamasunthary Sitsapesan *on the Third Anniversary of her passing away on 19th January 1995.*

You were happy and were loving
You were joyful and were kind
So loving thoughts and memories
Will us of you remind
Tears and sorrow haunted us
When you went away
But your warm and happy memories
Now are here to stay.

Fondly remembered and sadly missed by her loving husband Sitsapesan, son Manoharan, daughter Savitri, daughter-in-law Rebecca, son-in-law Varathan and grandchildren Holly, Daniel and Luxmmi. – 6 Cambria Lodge, 2c Oakhill Road, London SW15 2QU.



In loving memory of **Justice Tellippalai Wanam Rajaratnam,** *retired Supreme Court Judge and Member of Parliament, Colombo on the Fourth Anniversary of his passing away on 15th January 1994.*

'Love and Remembrance Last For Ever'.

Sadly missed and dearly loved by his family.

Tamil Performing Arts Society

The Tamil Performing Arts Society staged a festival of drama in London on 8th November, at the Winston Churchill Hall, Ruislip. This drama troupe has now firmly established an excellent reputation for both quality and entertainment, not only in the UK but also by their enthusiastic stagings worldwide. The staging in Ruislip was followed by a performance in Walthamstow the next Saturday. The November performances hailed the Society's 25th Drama Festival, not counting other numerous stagings, having set up production outside Sri Lanka in the early nineties. Such an achievement is highly commendable and full credit goes to K. Balendra, his partner in this endeavour and in life Anantharani and their talented troupe.

The two plays performed entirely by children were acted by students of the Brent Tamil School, London. 'Malaikalai Ahattriya Moodak Kilavan', based on an old Chinese folk story and 'Ayalar Theerppu', based on a Tamil folk tale, were imaginatively scripted by Professor Sivasegaram. Both plays, with a moral, mixed drama with music and dance and were performed with much enjoyment by the children. Their performance was a delight. The uplifting music, directed by Venthan, was another high point of these plays. Space does not permit me to list all their names, but special mention must be made of Shalini Balendra, Saritha Balendra, Arjun Thirunavukkarasu and Dayalini Thanabalasingham.

Turning to the adults, 'Eppo Varuvaro' was scripted by S.M.A. Ram and based on Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot'. It was about waiting; human longing for some meaning to come in to their lives, depicting ignorance, exploitation, greed, despair and endless hope. Readers from Brunel University joined the resident troupe in a polished and thought provoking performance.

'Aatrai Kadaththal' was a one-woman play movingly performed by Anantharani Balendra. It portrayed women's oppression and exploitation by men and one sat transfixed and moved by the portrayal.

The evening closed with a hilarious short play, 'Avasarakkararhal', again with a moral, by Mavai Nithyananthan. It was deftly presented by a talented cast and wound up a most enjoyable evening. All plays were brilliantly directed by K. Balendra and ably assisted by Anantharani. The performances confirmed the saying, 'Sirippatharkkalla Nadaham, Ull Nenjinul Sendru Iddippathatke Nadaham' (drama is not just to raise laughs, but to knock on your hearts with its message). I was left with one thought, why is it that our patronage for Tamil drama, such a rare and valuable commodity, is sadly lacking when compared with our show of support for other performing arts? Flock to see the Tamil Performing Arts Society's next performance – miss them at your peril!

Ravi Sanguhan.

Kavitha's Promising Debut

South London Tamil School in Croydon has earned the credit of promoting four students at Arangetram in Bharata Natyam. Earlier, Brinda Selvarajasingam and Jane Rasiah were presented by Smt Menaka Raviraj, and her colleague Smt Malathi Jeyanayagam presented her student Arni Balasundram. The latest and the fourth candidate is the vivacious young Kavitha Sivasubramaniam, who had her Arangetram at the Queen Mary's College Hall on 16th November. She is Menaka's disciple.

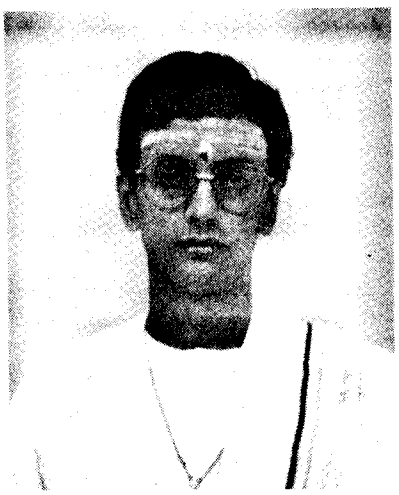
At the outset, besides Kavitha's sprightly movements and steps, knowledgeable rasikas would have noticed a remarkable freshness in Menaka's choreography and Nattuvangam which was crisp and commanding. (Friends tell me that she spent her summer holidays in Madras).

As for the repertoire, after the usual Pushpanjali and Alarippu, Jathiswaram contained some fresh strings of jathis which helped to build the necessary tempo for the following Varnam. This Varnam, 'Sakiye intha jalam enadi' in Sankarabharanam, a well beaten love theme based on the life of Krishna enthused Kavitha to exhibit her full abhinaya skill and jathis. Her demonstration of Krishna's various exploits in Sancharibhava modes was picturesque. Vocal support by well known Vidwan Manikkam Yogeswaran was adequate and smooth. Muthu Sivaraja's mridanga lead, Kothandapani's violin support and Gnanavaradan's flute added colour.

In the second half of the programme Kavitha danced with skilful abhinaya, various moods and actions described in the Padams. But in the song Alai Payuthe the stormy 'Wave' is not what is intended. The composition on Goddess Sakthi was danced with appropriate Thandava poses. This is credited to Smt Madhumathi Prakash of Madras, who helped Kavitha when she visited Madras. Incidentally, we come to learn that young Kavitha has been invited to take part in the Annual Dance Festival, conducted at Mahabalipuram by the Government of Tamil Nadu. A rare gesture which should kindle more interest to Kavitha and other young contenders in London.

S.S.S.

Brilliant Violinist Joins Bhavan's Staff.



Balu Raghuram, *talented young violinist has joined the teaching staff of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, the prestigious Institute of Indian Art and Culture in London W14. Balu is a musician who has already made his mark in India, where he has given solo concerts and accompanied many famous musicians. These include the late Maharajapuram Santanam, Mandolin U. Srinivas, Trichur V. Ramachandran, The Bombay Sisters, The Hyderabad Sisters and T.V. Gopalakrishnan. He is a disciple of Ulsoor S. Chandrashekar and Smt Neela Ramgopal.*

Balu's bowing and fingering techniques are very special. On a recent lecture/demonstration visit to Bristol University, he made an impact with his communication skills in demonstrating his instrument and explanations of South Indian Classical Music. He is acclaimed as the finest violinist in UK and Europe.

His violin concert takes place on 21.2.98 at 7pm at The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 4A Castletown Road, London W14 9HQ.

Lord Shiva's Dance

It was a great pleasure to witness an excellent exposition of Bharatha Natyam by Subadharshini, daughter of Dr. & Mrs. Somasegaram of Bexley, Kent, UK at the London Sivan Temple in Lewisham during the Annual Temple Festival recently.

Bharatha Natyam is the most cherished and valued heritage from our motherland linking our children to our roots both culturally and religiously. Suba as she is fondly called by family and friends is a gifted student of this art form and should be justly proud of her achievement. Despite her busy academic schedule as a third year Dentistry student she showed her total commitment to the development of the London Sivan Kovil by performing for the third year in succession to a packed and appreciative audience.

Under the able guidance of her Guru Ragini Rajagopal who did the Nattuvangam and the vocal accompaniment of Issaikkuyil Mathini Sriskandarajah, the performance enthralled the audience with the traditional music played in the temple known as 'Malari' performed to the emerging Lord as he starts his journey accompanied by his devotees round the courtyard. This was followed by a Keerthanam 'Adikkondar Indha Veddikkai', creating a feeling of total devotion to the Lord. It was excellent portrayal of the Cosmic Dance of Lord Shiva, praising his virtues and relating in song and dance, the magnificent and divine effect of Lord Shiva and his omnipresent effect on all beings. The 'patham' performed in praise of 'Durga', an incarnation of Mother Parvathi, enabled Suba to display her talents and skills in both expression and finesse to the full extent.

Our thanks are due to her parents for their initiative and enthusiasm in channelling her into this graceful and elegant art, particularly in a predominantly western environment. May Lord Shiva shower His blessings for her to attain greater heights.

A well-wisher.

Rathika Shines in Chennai

Young **Rathika,** *youngest daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Balasingam of Sri Lanka is one of the teenagers who fled to Madras (now Chennai), with her parents to take refuge from the ethnic conflict. Today she is a well known TV personality in South India.*

She graduated in Business Studies from Arts College in 1992. While at College she won awards for music and dance and was crowned 'Miss Arts College'. In 1993, she joined Sun TV and was picked to host the musical programme 'Paattukku Paattu'. She presented this programme with singers like Malayasia Vasudevan and came to be popularly known as 'Paattukku Paattu Rathika' among South Indian fans. Later she produced her own version of 'Paattukku Paattu' with film stars appearing as guest artistes. The quality of these programmes merited them being broadcast on 'Doordharshan' as well.

In 1996, Rathika moved to 'Vijay TV' and produced her own music-based programmes known as 'Kareoke Sa Re Ga Ma' and 'Paaduvor Padalam' and has former her own production company – 'Sindhu Bhairavi Productions'. April 1997 saw her pioneering new progamme – 'Chithirai Thiruvizha' produced on location in and around Madurai. The programme was based on different themes and broadcast daily for a month and this caught the imagination of the viewing public of Tamil Nadu. In mid and late 97 she interviewed famous stars and directors of the Indian Silver Screen. A picture of her interviewing Kamalhasan appears below.

She has clocked up over 200 public musical programmes and continues to bring glory to her motherland.

Rathika is the sister of the popular Veena Teacher, Renuka Shriananda of Harrow, Middx., UK.

Sri Lanka Cricket Tour to UK 1998

Itinerary

JULY	
Wed 8 (approx)	*Arrive in London.*
Thu 9 – Sat 11	*Practice (venue(s) TBC).*
Sun 12	*v Hampshire at Southampton or Somerset at Taunton or Gloucestershire at Bristol (1 day) depending on outcome of B&H Cup qualifying matches.*
Tue 14 – Thu 16	*v Somerset at Taunton (3 days).*
Sat 18 – Mon 20	***v Glamorgan at Cardiff (3 days).***
Wed 22	***v Worcestershire (1 day)***
Fri 24 – Mon 27	*v Leicestershire at Leicester (4 days).*
Fri 31 - Mon 3 Aug	*v Middlesex at Lord's (4 days).*
AUGUST	
Wed 5	*v ECB XI at Lakenham (1 day).*
Fri 7	*v Northants at Northampton (1 day).*
Sun 9	*v Northants at Milton Keynes (1 day).*
Tue 11	*v Kent at Canterbury or Lancs. at Old Trafford or Warwicks at Edgbaston (1 day) depending on outcome of NatWest Trophy qualifying matches.*
Triangular Tournament	
Fri 14 (Reserve day Sat 15)	*Sri Lanka v South Africa at Trent Bridge.*
Sun 16 (Reserve day Mon 17)	**England v Sri Lanka at Lord's.**
Tue 18 (Reserve day Wed 19)	*England v South Africa at Edgbaston*
Thu 20 (Reserve day Fri 21)	**Final at Lord's.**
Sat 22 – Mon 24	*v Hants at Southampton (3*
Thu 27 – Mon 31	**CORNHILL TEST MATCH at The Oval.**
Tue 1 Sept.	*Depart.*

N.B. The three and four-day matches against First Class Counties will form part of the 1998 Vodafone Challenge.

Matches in bold italics still subject to final confirmation.

The highlights of the tour are a triangular 1 day tournament which involves England, Sri Lanka and South Africa, along with a Test Match at the Oval in London. This is the first occasion when triangular 1 day Internationals of this type are to be played in England and the English Cricket Board is confident it will prove to be a great success. Tickets for both the 1 day International and the Test Match are expected to be in demand. Those wishing to purchase these tickets are advised to do so well in advance and contact the UK Representative Dr. Daya Pandita-Gunawardena, 132 Foxley Lane, Purley, Surrey CR8 3NE. TEL: 0181 660 7404 for further information.

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